

Resurrection

The Quest to Restore and Honor a Neglected Military Cemetery



Dennis Kelly and Elaine Haynes



Resurrection

Mare Island Naval Shipyard's Cemetery

Prepared in cooperation with



I. Table of Contents

I.	Table of Contents.....	1
I.	Dedication.....	6
II.	Foreword.....	9
III.	Mare Island Naval Shipyard – Forging 142 Years of Service to the Nation	12
A.	Early Years and the Transition to a Steel Navy (1854–1898)	12
B.	The Spanish-American War (1898).....	13
C.	Mare Island Ascends: The Evans Revolution in Shipbuilding	14
D.	World War I and the Birth of the Modern Navy (1914–1918)	16
E.	Interwar Years and World War II (1919–1945)	17
1.	A Changing Workforce	18
2.	Submarines, Ships, and Strategy.....	18
3.	Lend-Lease and Allied Cooperation	19
4.	Legacy of the War Years.....	19
F.	The Cold War Era (1946–1996)	20
1.	The Rise of the Strategic Deterrent Fleet.....	20
2.	The Spy Submarine: USS Halibut’s Second Life.....	21
3.	Engineering Ingenuity and Innovation	22
4.	A Quiet End to a Long War.....	23
5.	From Strategic Asset to Surplus Property; A Victim of Its Success	24
G.	Legacy and Impact.....	25

1.	A City Forged by Service.....	26
1.	Memory, Heritage, and Renewal	26
2.	Looking Ahead.....	27
IV.	The Mare Island Naval Cemetery	29
A.	Introduction.....	29
B.	General Description.....	30
C.	The Headstones.....	32
D.	Monuments	35
E.	Who is Buried at MINC?	36
F.	Medal of Honor Recipients.....	38
G.	Prominent Families.....	39
	Several prominent families, including the Turner family, the McDougal family, and the MacKenzie family, are also laid to rest at the MINC. Each family included at least one individual who made significant contributions to the success of the Mare Island Naval Yard and in military history.....	39
H.	Animals at MINC.....	41
I.	Causes of Death.....	42
J.	Closure.....	42
K.	Falling into Disrepair.....	43
V.	The BRAC Reckoning: Strategic Oversight and Forgotten Sacrifice	44
VI.	Custodians of Quiet Decline	47
A.	The Transfer, in Name Only.....	47
1.	The City's Unwanted Charge	48
2.	Keeping the Flame Alive.....	49
3.	International Reverence.....	50
4.	A Living Memory, on the Edge	50

VII.	The NPS Effort	51
A.	Early Interest and Recognition	51
B.	Congressman Miller’s 2010 Request	51
C.	Local Response and Volunteer Burden	53
D.	The 2015 Revised Request	53
E.	Renewed Advocacy and Political Strategy	54
F.	A Struggle Unfinished	55
VIII.	Breaking the Silence — The Reawakening at Mare Island	56
A.	A Chance Visit, a Shocking Discovery	56
B.	A National Shame, Hidden in Plain Sight.....	57
C.	From Outrage to Action.....	58
IX.	Legacy, Jurisdiction and the Long Road to Federal Stewardship.....	59
A.	From Federal Hands to Local Custody.....	59
B.	Resistance from Within: The Precedent Dilemma	60
C.	The Advocates Who Refused to Let Go.....	61
D.	Department of Defense Innovative Readiness Training (IRT): A Turning Point	63
E.	The Struggle for Enabling Legislation	65
F.	Clearing the Final Hurdles to transfer	68
1.	Continued Opposition and Overcoming the VA Report to Congress.....	68
2.	The Final Hurdle: An Unnecessary Complication	71
G.	Restoring Honor at the MINC: A Victory for Veterans and Advocates Alike	72
X.	Epilogue	75
	One Final Note.....	78

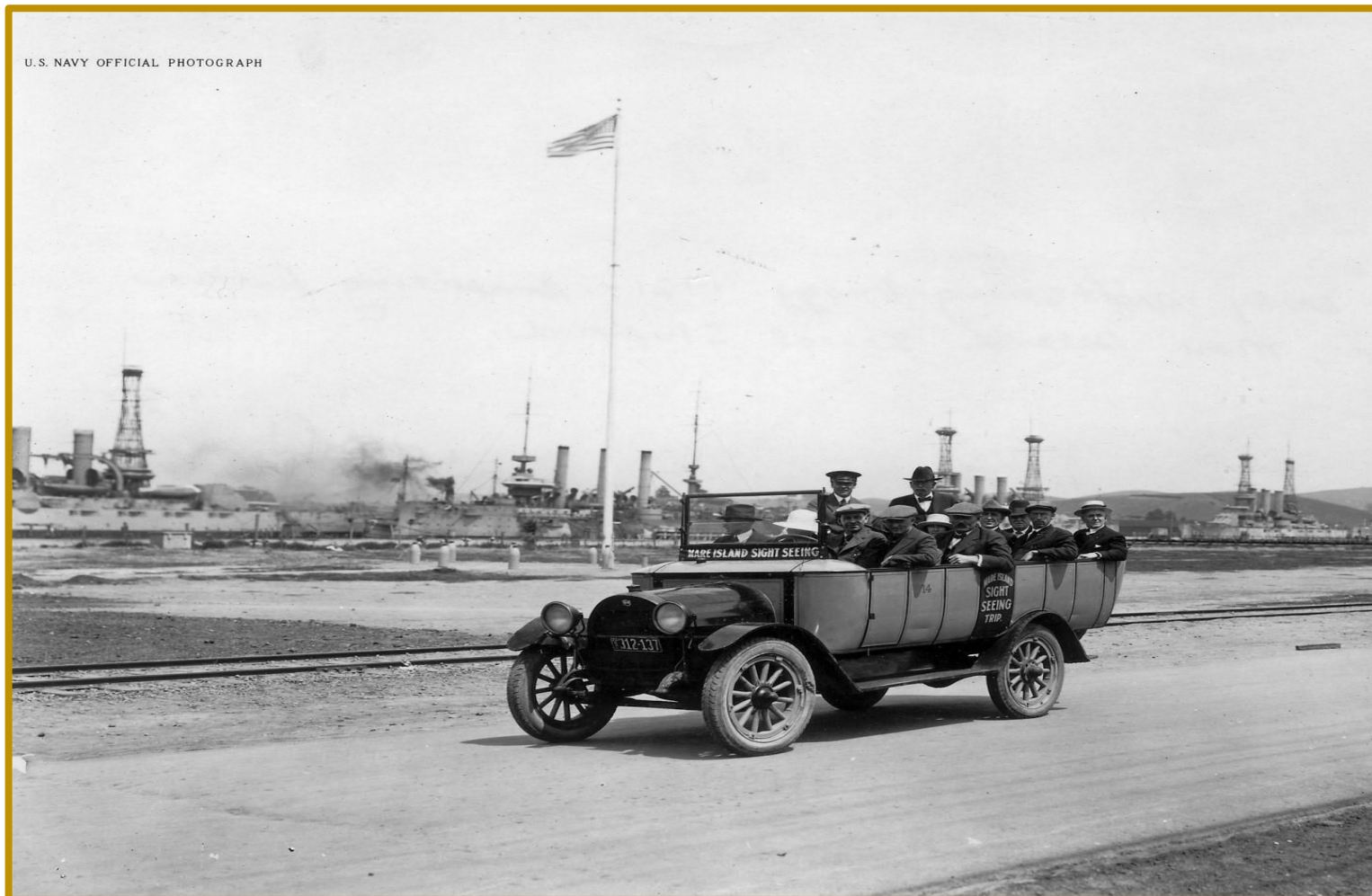
Appendices

[Appendix A: Milestones in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery Transfer, Early California and Naval Foundations \(1848–1854\)](#)

[Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process](#)

[Appendix C: Trust Encumbrances and the Path to Federal Transfer](#)

[Appendix D: Additional Resources](#)



In this 1920s photograph, a tour bus pauses at the southern edge of Mare Island, its passengers gazing out over the anchored might of the Pacific Battle Fleet—a powerful symbol of American naval dominance. Tucked discreetly into the hillside behind the vehicle lies the Mare Island Naval Cemetery, a quiet resting place honoring those whose service shaped the fleet on display. The image juxtaposes national power with personal sacrifice, capturing two legacies entwined on one historic shoreline. (Image: Public Domain)

I. Dedication

As 2017 dawned, the American public was gripped by dramatic headlines: the inauguration of a bold, unconventional new president, a relentless war against ISIS, the awe of the “Great American Eclipse,” while in the Entertainment Capital of the World the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history took place at a music festival. Amid this national turbulence, a retired Navy captain stumbled upon a neglected chapter of military history, a cemetery hidden behind aging ordnance magazines and a former ammunition depot in the northern reaches of San Francisco Bay.

For decades, the Mare Island Naval Cemetery (MINC) quietly fell into disrepair. The decline came so gradually that neglect became part of the landscape. Overgrown vegetation, crumbling walkways, toppled headstones, and damage from longstanding slope instability no longer shocked, they were expected. Much like the way urban encampments have become normalized in many cities, the cemetery’s condition reflected a broader societal desensitization to once-unacceptable realities. But when Captain Ralph Parrott, unfamiliar with the local inertia and guided by an unwavering belief in honoring military service, came upon Mare Island, the weight of its abandonment struck him with clarity. He had seen immaculate cemeteries abroad. This place, by contrast, was forgotten and dishonored.

What he saw stunned him: fractured stones, deteriorating infrastructure, and a silence heavy with neglect. The site was not just overgrown, it was unjust. More than 900 souls, including sailors, Marines, civilians, and Medal of Honor recipients, rested here in obscurity. It was an insult to their service and a failure of national stewardship.

This story is dedicated to all who shared Captain Parrott’s outrage and acted. Their efforts sparked a movement that united a sweeping coalition of veterans, volunteers, local leaders, federal agencies, military organizations, media, and everyday citizens. Over the next decade, tens of thousands of individuals, many of them veterans and members of the public, joined the cause. Together, they launched a campaign involving the City of Vallejo, Solano County, the State of California, the U.S. Congress, the Navy, the Army, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and many more.

Despite President Lincoln’s enduring promise “to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan,” the Mare Island Cemetery had been abandoned, an unintentional casualty of post–Cold War cost-cutting. Yet from the first burial in 1856, Quartermaster George Dowd of the USS *Massachusetts*, to the shipyard’s closure in 1996, Mare Island served as a crucible of military and industrial innovation. Generations of men and women of every race and background built the fleet, sustained it, and served the nation with quiet, steadfast pride.

Today, Vallejo is one of America's most diverse cities, its identity rooted in the labor and legacy of Mare Island. The cemetery reflects that heritage: a resting place where diversity, duty, and dignity lie side by side.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation, Vallejo Navy League, Admiral O'Kane Sea Scouts, Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve, the Army Reserve, the City of Vallejo, Congressman George Miller, Mike Thompson, John Garamendi, Senator Diane Feinstein, Vice President Kamala Harris, the American Heroes discussed herein and the countless other individuals who labored for decades to preserve this sacred site. Through thousands of volunteer hours and unwavering commitment, they honored the fallen and helped breathe life back into hallowed ground.

May this compendium illuminate what moved these volunteers to act, and why this once-forgotten cemetery deserves to be remembered, forever. The effort to reclaim and restore MINC was not merely a community undertaking, but a civic crusade that demanded years of persistence through legal intricacies and bureaucratic entanglements. Crucial to its success were the sustained efforts of institutional allies, among them, the Department of Defense's (DoD) Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) program, whose engineering team played a hands-on role in the physical transformation of the site, and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy, whose engagement helped bridge policy and purpose at the federal level. On November 27, 2023, the Department of Veterans Affairs assumed full stewardship, with the commitment to preserving the cemetery as a national shrine. Yet future visitors, quietly reflecting among its orderly graves, may never know how this place was rescued from obscurity. By documenting its journey, this compendium affirms that honoring memory is a shared civic responsibility done not only by institutions and public servants, but by citizens whose resolve ensured that history would not be forgotten.

With thanks to Nestor Aliga, Thomas Bandzul, Robert Wyllie, and Ralph Parrott whose vision and determination helped ensure that the Mare Island Cemetery will be preserved and maintained for generations to come.

© 2026 Dennis Kelly and Elaine Haynes

drkelly5@comcast.net and elainelfkf@gmail.com

Cover Photo – Beneath windswept eucalyptus and timeworn headstones, the MINC bears silent witness to generations of sacrifice. Once abandoned, it now stands on the threshold of renewal, a sacred place reclaiming its dignity through memory and stewardship.

Inside Photo – Federal legislators took notice when it emerged that the Russian Consulate in San Francisco was maintaining the graves of Russian sailors at the Mare Island Naval Cemetery to a higher standard than those of U.S. service members buried there. In addition to providing funds for maintenance, the headstones of the graves were replaced. In contrast, the graves of US Sailors lie broken on the ground. The Russian sailors had died heroically while fighting fires in San Francisco in the 1860s, whereas the grave marker of a US Sailor who was awarded the Medal of Honor for lifesaving lies broken on the ground. An irony of the contrast in the treatment of their graves that helped spur the passage of the enabling legislation that ensured that the MINC would be treated as a National Shrine.

II. Foreword

This compendium documents how an important naval cemetery in Vallejo, California was overlooked and abandoned, then rescued through a determined, grassroots campaign by veterans and citizens who refused to accept that outcome. Their work not only restored the MINC but ensured its transfer to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), securing perpetual federal care under national shrine standards.

MINC is the oldest naval cemetery on the Pacific Coast. Established in 1856 on the grounds of the former Mare Island Naval Shipyard, it is the final resting place for more than 860 veterans, including four Medal of Honor recipients, and over 100 of their family members. Although the Navy initially maintained the cemetery, care was sharply reduced after 1921, when officials proposed removing the graves to expand the adjacent Naval Ordnance Depot and reinter the dead at the National Cemetery in San Francisco. That plan was never funded, leaving the cemetery in a state of chronic neglect for decades. When Mare Island closed in 1996 under the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process, this neglect was effectively institutionalized, and formal Navy stewardship ceased altogether.

Responsibility for the land, including the cemetery, was transferred to the City of Vallejo for economic redevelopment. But the cemetery's future was not clearly planned. Oversights during the BRAC process, including a waiver of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), meant that important assessments of historical, environmental, and cultural value were bypassed when the decision was made to close the base. During federal screening

Voices Behind the Change – What Turned the Tide

Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) Impact

“Before this project, the site was a liability. Afterward, it was a sacred responsibility.”

— *Maj. Douglas Hayes*, Officer in Charge, 397th Engineer Battalion

Community Advocacy

“It’s a moral imperative. These veterans didn’t get to choose their resting place, so it’s our duty to preserve it.”

— *Capt. Ralph Parrott, USN (Ret.)*, Mare Island cemetery advocate

Legislative Pressure

“The governor’s signature brings us one step closer to ensuring that the Mare Island National Cemetery is properly cared for and preserved for generations to come.”

— *Rep. Mike Thompson*, following Governor Gavin Newsom's approval in October 2023

Reconsideration within the VA

“The IRT effort eliminated every operational obstacle. We’re now positioned to honor the site as it should be.”

— *Unnamed NCA Staff Member*, responding to stakeholder inquiries post-transfer

for property disposal the VA declined to request the site, citing policies prioritizing active cemeteries. The Navy's reliance on the Section 106 historic preservation process proved insufficient to guarantee lasting protection. Section 106, established under the National Historic Preservation Act, requires federal agencies to consider the effects of their undertakings on historic properties and to consult with stakeholders such as State Historic Preservation Officers, Tribal representatives, and local communities. While this process can identify and attempt to mitigate adverse impacts, it does not mandate preservation or provide ongoing stewardship once a property leaves federal ownership. In the case of Mare Island, this meant that while historic values were formally acknowledged during disposal, there was no binding mechanism to ensure the cemetery's long-term care.

By the early 2000s, the cemetery had slipped into disrepair. But that began to change in 2018, when a growing coalition of veterans, preservationists, elected leaders, agencies, and engaged citizens launched an unprecedented campaign. Their goal was clear: to restore the cemetery and ensure it was honored with the dignity its occupants had earned through service.

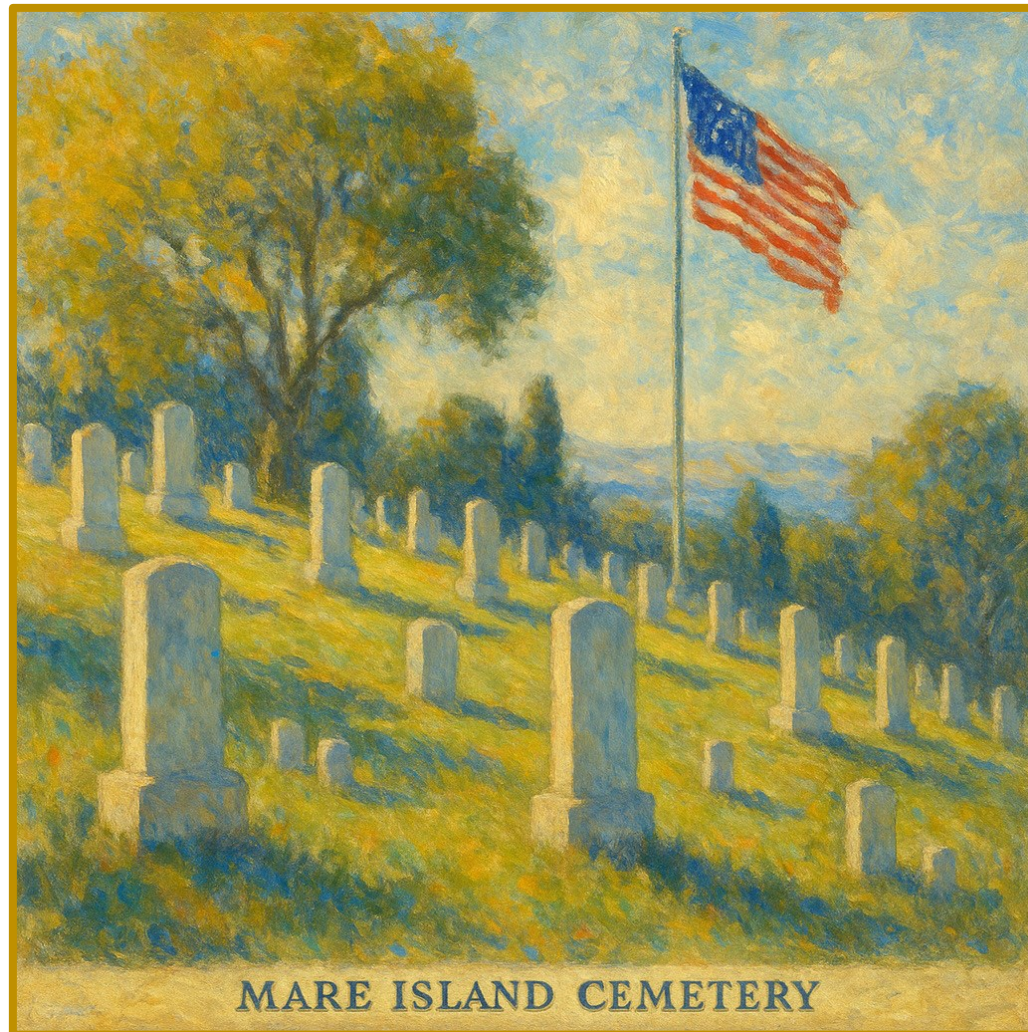
This effort eventually spanned all levels of government and civil society, from Vallejo and Solano County to Congress, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Army Reserve, the California State Lands Commission, numerous veterans service organizations, and thousands of concerned individuals. Together, they overcame complex legal hurdles, outdated assumptions, and bureaucratic inertia.

The path to reacquiring and preserving the cemetery was far from easy, but it was profoundly worthwhile. MINC is once again recognized for what it is: a historic national site deserving reverent care, now protected and maintained by the VA. [Appendix A](#) provides a timeline of the life of Mare Island Naval Shipyard and the key milestones associated with the MINC.

This book is co-authored by Elaine Haynes and Dennis Kelly, both of whom were involved in the cemetery's restoration and preservation. It tells the story of a forgotten place, rediscovered and redeemed by people who would not look away. It is a story of civic responsibility, military legacy, and the enduring power of collective action.

Elaine Haynes: Elaine, a city of Vallejo local, grew up playing in the Mare Island Nature Preserve, including the Mare Island Cemetery. Decades later, she worked with the City of Vallejo and numerous volunteers to record all the headstones as part of her Master's thesis for Historical Archaeology. Elaine now works as an archaeological consultant, specializing in maritime history and archaeology.

Dennis Kelly: Dennis served as an engineer at Mare Island Naval Shipyard from 1974 until its closure in 1996, holding several technical and managerial roles. He continued working with the Navy during the base disposal process before transitioning to private consulting. A long-time contributor to the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation, Dennis has dedicated more than 30 years to preserving the shipyard's history and educating future generations.



“A Nation that fails to honor its heroes soon will have no heroes to honor.”

Attributed to Winston Churchill (image: Grok AI)

III. Mare Island Naval Shipyard – Forging 142 Years of Service to the Nation

Hidden in plain sight along the calm waters of San Pablo Bay, Mare Island Naval Shipyard stood for more than a century as a sentinel of American maritime power. From its frontier origins through the Cold War, the shipyard helped shape the U.S. Navy, and the American identity, through innovation, resilience, and sacrifice.

That legacy crystallized in 1892, when tragedy struck at Mare Island's filling magazine. A violent explosion killed fifteen sailors assigned to the USS *Boston*. One of the Navy's earliest industrial disasters, the blast reverberated throughout the fleet and etched itself into the yard's history. In tribute, the *Boston*'s crew commissioned a marble monument in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery (MINC), a solemn memorial to comrades lost. They would later go on to distinguish themselves in the Spanish-American War, carrying that memory into battle. The monument still stands, a symbol of fraternity and the high cost of naval service, even in times of peace.

A. Early Years and the Transition to a Steel Navy (1854–1898)

In 1852, Secretary of the Navy William A. Graham sent Commodore John Drake Sloat to identify a site for a naval base on the Pacific Coast. California had recently joined the Union, and the Navy sought a foothold to support the Pacific Squadron and project American maritime power in the region.

After surveying several locations, Sloat selected Mare Island, a low-lying landmass near Vallejo, for its sheltered harbor, deep-water access, and the abundant timber resources available in the region. On January 4, 1853, the federal government purchased the island for \$83,491. The original deed covered approximately 956 acres, including marshland, tide flats, and key



USS Saginaw Unknown Location and Date
Launched in 1859 the USS Saginaw was the first ship built at Mare Island Naval Shipyard (Image: Public Domain)

waterfront access. As the Navy developed the shipyard, Mare Island expanded, tidal, areas were filled in to support drydocks, warehouses, workshops, and housing.



Mare Island as seen across the Mare Island Strait from the City of Vallejo in 1858.

All the construction you see on the formerly barren island took place during Admiral Farragut's tenure as the first shipyard Commander
(Image: Public Domain)

In September 1854, Commander David Glasgow Farragut arrived to oversee the shipyard's construction. Then little more than open fields and squatters' cabins, Mare Island posed major logistical challenges. The Gold Rush had drained the region of skilled labor, and materials like coal and lumber had to be shipped at great cost from the East Coast or collected from the region. Still, Farragut persevered. By 1858, Mare Island had evolved into a functioning naval yard, complete with drydocks, shipways, and the foundations of Pacific naval expansion. Farragut, described as "a dapper little gentleman... though slightly built, he had presence, the look of a man who has seen many things" (San Francisco *Chronicle*, 1900), laid the groundwork for the yard's rise to national prominence.

As the Navy transitioned from wooden sailing ships to steam- and steel-powered vessels, Mare Island adapted quickly. Pioneering naval engineer Rear Admiral Benjamin Franklin Isherwood conducted early propulsion experiments at the yard, helping to standardize screw propellers across the fleet and solidifying Mare Island's role in technical advancement.

By the 1880s, Mare Island was producing the first steel-hulled ships on the West Coast, laying the foundation for a modern, industrialized Navy.

B. The Spanish-American War (1898)

Mare Island's strategic value surged during the Spanish-American War, serving as a vital hub for preparing ships and crews bound for the Pacific theater. While combat unfolded thousands of miles away, Mare Island played a critical support role. Every ship in Admiral George Dewey's fleet at the Battle of Manila Bay, including the flagship USS *Olympia*, was serviced at Mare Island. The *Olympia* was coaled, armed, and made battle-ready at the yard before sailing through the Golden Gate en route to the Asiatic Squadron. On May 1, 1898, Dewey issued his famous order from her bridge: "You may fire when ready, Gridley."

Just weeks before that decisive battle, Mare Island endured a natural disaster. On March 30, 1898, an earthquake centered on the shipyard and estimated between 5.8 and 6.4 magnitude struck. It caused widespread damage at the shipyard: brick quarters collapsed, the sawmill and paint shop were destroyed. Despite the destruction, shipyard workers pushed forward. War preparations took precedence, and Mare Island resumed operations within days, testament to the yard's resilience and the urgency of its mission.

The Spanish-American War marked a turning point in U.S. and world history. In just a few months, the United States emerged from the conflict as a global power, with new territorial holdings stretching from the Caribbean to the Pacific. The war ended Spain's colonial dominance in the Western Hemisphere and signaled the beginning of America's strategic presence in Asia. Mare Island's role in outfitting Dewey's fleet placed it squarely in the center of that transformation, its waterfront a launchpad for a new era of American influence.

The Mare Island Museum later commemorated this period with a Spanish-American War exhibit, featuring a model of the *Olympia* and detailing the shipyard's essential role in outfitting the Pacific Fleet.

"The Spanish-American War turned the United States into a world power." — *Senator Henry Cabot Lodge*

C. Mare Island Ascends: The Evans Revolution in Shipbuilding

By the early 20th century, Mare Island was well established but lagged East Coast shipyards in efficiency and output. That changed with the arrival of Lieutenant Commander Holden A. Evans in 1904. A Naval Academy graduate and accomplished naval architect, Evans



US Navy Constructor Holden Evans
(Image: Public Domain)

had trained at the University of Glasgow and arrived at Mare Island determined to modernize its operations. He found a facility led largely by line officers unfamiliar with industrial management, many of whom outranked him but lacked the technical expertise to oversee complex shipyard operations.



The collier USS *Prometheus* on Mare Island's building ways days before her 1904 launch

a pivotal moment that defied expectations. Built in competition with the East Coast's top naval yard, she was completed at lower cost, securing Mare Island's reputation as a leading builder of the new steel navy. (Image: Public Domain)

Evans had already proven the power of efficiency. During the Spanish-American War, he was assigned to Key West to oversee repairs of Army transports supporting the blockade of Cuba. Applying emerging principles of industrial organization, he dramatically reduced turnaround times and costs. His success caught the attention of Navy leadership and laid the groundwork for his appointment to Mare Island. At Mare Island, Evans introduced scientific management principles inspired by Frederick W. Taylor. He centralized authority under the Chief Constructor (himself), restructured reporting lines, introduced cost-tracking systems, and emphasized merit-based hiring. He also challenged entrenched practices, such as hiring based on religious affiliation, and replaced them with performance-based standards. His reforms were controversial but effective.

In 1908, Mare Island was awarded a contract to build the USS *Prometheus*. A sister ship, the USS *Vestal*, was built at Brooklyn Navy Yard. Mare Island completed *Prometheus* for over \$100,000 less, a triumph of efficiency and a vindication of Evans' methods. This success earned Mare Island the contract for the USS *Jupiter*, a collier that would later be converted into the Navy's first aircraft carrier, USS *Langley*. Under Evans' leadership, Mare Island proved it could not only compete with its East Coast peers, but lead.

Evans' tenure wasn't without turbulence. He led emergency efforts after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and was involved in the aftermath of the *Bennington* boiler explosion. A highly publicized divorce following a scandal involving a junior officer briefly overshadowed his achievements but did not diminish his professional legacy. His book, *Cost Keeping and Scientific Management* (1911), became a standard in naval industrial circles.

I intend this book to be a criticism of the Navy's industrial methods; a voice lifted in the wilderness to cry efficiency and reform." — *Holden A. Evans, Cost Keeping and Scientific Management*

D. World War I and the Birth of the Modern Navy (1914–1918)

World War I saw Mare Island pivot to a new role as a training ground and major shipbuilder. In 1911, the Marine Corps established one of its first formal recruit training depots at Mare Island. By 1912, it had become the sole West Coast boot camp for Marines until operations moved to San Diego in 1923. The Navy also opened a recruit training station on Mare Island during the war, which operated until Great Lakes and San Diego became the primary training centers.

The yard also broke records, most notably with the USS *Ward*, a destroyer launched just 17½ days after her keel was laid, a feat for building a warship that is still unmatched. This achievement foreshadowed Mare Island's growing importance in the decades to come.

During World War II, Mare Island became a critical bulwark against the German submarine menace that ultimately claimed over 5,000 Allied ships. The shipyard produced dozens of destroyers and destroyer escorts, fast, maneuverable vessels equipped with sonar, depth charges, and hedgehog projectors designed specifically to hunt and neutralize U-boats. These ships formed the backbone of convoy protection and hunter-killer groups that helped turn the tide in the Battle of the Atlantic. Mare Island's output was not only a testament to industrial might, but a direct contribution to safeguarding global supply lines and Allied victory.



Marines board a transport while en route to France.

During World War Mare Island served as the Boot Camp for all Marines on the West Coast. At its peak, Mare Island was processing 3,800 Marines. In this picture, 800 of the Marines from Mare Island were killed during the conflict.

(Image: Public Domain)

Mare Island was not immune to crisis. The 1918 Spanish flu pandemic swept through the shipyard, infecting thousands and overwhelming medical facilities. A nearby powder magazine explosion in July of that year, initially feared to be sabotage, only added to the chaos.

Still, Mare Island endured, emerging from World War I as a critical node in the Navy's expanding infrastructure and a symbol of American resilience and innovation.

E. Interwar Years and World War II (1919–1945)

Following the First World War, Mare Island Naval Shipyard shifted its focus to fleet maintenance, retrofitting, and innovation. During the interwar years, the yard kept pace with evolving naval strategy, refining shipbuilding techniques and expanding its industrial base in preparation for conflicts yet to come.

The yard's crowning achievement in this era was the construction of the USS *California* (BB-44), the only post-dreadnought battleship built on the West Coast. Authorized under the 1916 Naval Act, she was laid down in 1919 and launched in 1921. Armed with eight 14-inch guns, *California* symbolized Mare Island's industrial might and strategic value.

But it was the outbreak of World War II that would transform Mare Island into a vital engine of American naval power, and into the largest employer in Solano County history.

Between 1941 and 1945, Mare Island produced 17 submarines, overhauled and repaired hundreds of vessels, and developed cutting-edge technologies for sonar, torpedo delivery, and amphibious operations. The yard operated around the clock, seven days a week, with thousands of workers laboring in overlapping shifts. At its wartime peak, Mare Island employed more than 40,000 people, a dramatic increase from its prewar workforce of just a few thousand.

This rapid expansion overwhelmed the city of Vallejo. Housing shortages became acute, prompting the construction of federally funded housing projects, temporary trailer parks, and barracks. Entire neighborhoods emerged almost overnight to accommodate the influx of shipyard workers and their families. The city's population more than doubled during the war years.

Because of that housing shortage, the shipyard turned to transporting workers from neighboring communities in Napa and Solano counties and well beyond. A fleet of over 100 buses ran daily in tightly scheduled shifts. As one wartime employee recalled, "*You didn't need a clock. The buses told you when it was time to work, eat, or sleep.*"

1. A Changing Workforce



During World War II, approximately 20% to 25% of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard workforce was female.

The women in this photograph are busy constructing a massive submarine tender in the Mare Island building ways. One of five such ships built during the war. (Image: Public Domain)

The wartime labor shortage shattered long-standing barriers in American industry, and Mare Island was no exception. Women stepped into roles historically reserved for men, taking up tools as welders, electricians, pipefitters, and machinists. These "Rosies" of Mare Island not only contributed critical labor but helped redefine the gender dynamics of industrial America.

One former welder recalled, *"We weren't just helping the war. We were proving we could do the job, and we did."*

African Americans, long excluded from skilled trades in shipyards, were hired in greater numbers following President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802, which prohibited discrimination in defense industries. Many initially faced relegation to night shifts and physically demanding tasks, but with persistence, some broke through as journeymen, supervisors, and foremen.

"Mare Island gave me a chance," said one Black shipfitter. *"Not a perfect one, but a real one."*

The yard also employed Filipino, Mexican American, and Chinese American workers, whose labor had been marginalized or barred outright in earlier decades. Their presence during the war not only

helped sustain production, it reshaped the social fabric of Vallejo and nearby communities. While racial tensions persisted, the wartime workforce marked a turning point in the evolution of civil rights and economic inclusion in California.

2. Submarines, Ships, and Strategy

Mare Island's shipbuilding output during World War II centered on a wide spectrum of warships. Included in that mix was a particular focus on submarines, one of the Navy's most decisive weapons in the Pacific. Silent, stealthy, and lethal, these submarines sank enemy shipping, scouted Japanese fleet movements, and carried out special operations missions across the Pacific theater.

Submarines built at Mare Island participated in major campaigns, from the Battle of Leyte Gulf to the strategic blockade of Japan. The yard also became a center for submarine repair and refit, with a steady flow of returning boats cycling through for overhauls, upgrades, and damage repairs.

In addition to submarines, Mare Island constructed auxiliary vessels, destroyer escorts, minesweepers, and amphibious craft. The yard's adaptability and speed were widely praised. It wasn't just a factory; it was a strategic asset.

3. Lend-Lease and Allied Cooperation

Mare Island's contributions extended beyond the U.S. fleet. Under the Lend-Lease program, the yard maintained and refitted ships for Allied navies, including British destroyers and Canadian escorts. These efforts supported trans-Pacific and Atlantic convoys, reinforcing the collaborative nature of the Allied war effort.

As one Navy officer wrote in 1944, *"If the Pacific Fleet is the sword, Mare Island is the forge."*

4. Legacy of the War Years

By war's end, Mare Island had become synonymous with West Coast naval might. Its workforce in combination with wartime industrial mobilization throughout the San Francisco Bay Area had reshaped the industrial economy of Northern California, its submarines had helped turn the tide in the Pacific, and its operations had helped modernize the Navy's logistical and repair capabilities.

But the impact was also personal. Generations of Vallejo families could trace their prosperity, and their patriotism, to time spent working at the shipyard. The physical transformation of Mare Island during the war was paralleled by a transformation in national identity: a country mobilized, diversified, and tested.

That legacy would endure into the Cold War and beyond, even as the shipyard's wartime intensity gradually gave way to new threats and new challenges.



The first submarine built at Mare Island with the first Aircraft Carrier in the Navy in the background. *The submarine is the USS Nautilus commissioned in 1930. The carrier is the USS Langley. Build at Mare Island and commissioned in 1913 as a Collier, she was later converted to an aircraft carrier and commissioned in 1922. (Image: Public Domain)*

F. The Cold War Era (1946–1996)



USS Halibut (SSGN-587) test fires a Regulus I Missile
The world's first purpose-built nuclear-powered submarine capable of firing Nuclear tipped missiles was built and commissioned at Mare Island in 1960. (Image: Public Domain)

As global tensions sharpened in the aftermath of World War II, Mare Island Naval Shipyard evolved into a critical stronghold of America's Cold War strategy. Over the next five decades, it would become the only West Coast yard authorized to construct nuclear-powered submarines, a distinction that placed it at the forefront of technological innovation, strategic deterrence, and underwater warfare.

In 1957, Mare Island laid the keel for USS *Sargo* (SSN-583), the first nuclear submarine built on the Pacific Coast. But it was USS *Halibut*, Ship Submersible Guided-missile Nuclear, (SSGN-587), commissioned in 1960, that marked a true turning point. *Halibut* was the first submarine in the world designed from the keel up to carry and launch guided nuclear missiles, specifically the Regulus I and II cruise missiles. She featured an internal hangar with five Regulus missiles and was equipped with a revolutionary Ship's Inertial Navigation System (SINS), allowing for unprecedented underwater precision targeting.

On March 25, 1960, *Halibut* became the first nuclear-powered submarine to successfully launch a guided missile. Her deterrent patrols in the Pacific were among the earliest examples of underwater strategic missile deployment, setting the stage for the Polaris ballistic missile era and redefining submarine warfare.

1. The Rise of the Strategic Deterrent Fleet

Building on the success of *Halibut*, Mare Island produced seven Polaris-class ballistic missile submarines, including USS *Mariano G. Vallejo* (SSBN-658), named for the city and its founder. These “boomers,” each armed with nuclear missiles, formed the backbone of the Navy's second-strike capability during the Cold War. Operating silently beneath the ocean, they served as invisible guardians of deterrence, able to retaliate in the event of nuclear attack.

Mare Island's role in constructing and maintaining these submarines required the highest levels of technical precision and secrecy. Nuclear propulsion systems, missile guidance technologies, sonar arrays, and advanced materials were all developed, assembled, and maintained at the shipyard. The labor force evolved alongside these demands, with engineers, scientists, welders, and electricians working under classified protocols and intense quality assurance standards.

2. The Spy Submarine: USS Halibut's Second Life

With the advent of ballistic missile submarines boasting far longer ranges, larger payloads, and vastly improved stealth, Halibut's original strategic deterrence role was rendered obsolete. Yet rather than being decommissioned, she was reborn. Following her missile deployment service, Halibut was repurposed into a deep-diving, high-tech espionage platform, one of the most secretive and versatile submarines of the Cold War. Outfitted with seabed skids, a saturation diving habitat, advanced electronic surveillance equipment, and remote-operated tools, she carried out some of the Navy's most audacious intelligence operations.

Among her covert missions:

- **Operation Ivy Bells**, in which Halibut tapped Soviet undersea communications cables in the Sea of Okhotsk, providing invaluable intelligence to the U.S. for years.
- **Reconnaissance of the sunken Soviet submarine K-129**, laying the groundwork for the CIA's infamous Project Azorian, a secret attempt to raise the vessel using Howard Hughes' specially designed recovery ship.



A nuclear submarine undergoing overhaul at the Mare Island waterfront, 1980s. The dense web of cables and support systems speaks to the shipyard's Cold War complexity, where power projection was a deadly serious enterprise in the atomic age. Yet this same waterfront once served vessels of sail and wood—testament to Mare Island's enduring legacy as a crucible of evolving naval technologies across centuries.

(Image: Public Domain)



USS Parche (SSN-683) sails under the Golden Gate bridge returning from a Covert Mission.
The Parche was cut in half to insert a secret 100ft long hull section (the bulge in front of the sail) in 1987.
 (Image: Public Domain)

These operations were so sensitive that they remained classified for decades. Even Navy inspectors missed their significance during later base closure assessments. As one intelligence historian put it, Halibut became “*a submarine that hovered in place and dangled cameras miles down, deep enough to scout the ocean bottom for Soviet treasures.*”

Importantly, Halibut’s transformation and covert missions were not isolated efforts. She became the first in a cadre of submarines, each designed or heavily modified at Mare Island for clandestine deep-sea intelligence work. This elite group included the USS Seawolf, USS Parche, USS Richard B. Russell, and, by some accounts, the USS Drum. In addition to these submarines, Mare Island engineers worked on other platforms vital to surveillance operations, including oceanographic research vessels and secret barges outfitted for sensitive tasks far from public view.

Altogether, this covert ocean engineering work was considered so crucial to national security that it came to involve nearly 20% of the shipyard’s workforce and carried the highest operational priority. Yet the remaining 80% of ship work, routine maintenance, overhauls, and surface vessel support conducted both onsite and remotely at naval bases around the world, functioned in part as a strategic veil. These conventional operations provided a layer of plausible deniability, masking the existence and scale of classified Cold War programs hidden in plain sight.

As we will explore in later chapters, the irony remains: despite the profound importance of these critical missions, they were excluded from the military value assessments during the formal base closure process. In the absence of disclosure, Mare Island’s most consequential work became invisible to the decision-makers tasked with evaluating its role in national defense.

3. Engineering Ingenuity and Innovation

Throughout the Cold War, Mare Island led numerous advancements in naval engineering. It pioneered acoustic quieting technologies, enhanced propulsion systems, and conducted some of the earliest integration of digital fire control and sonar suites in U.S. submarines. The

shipyard's work extended beyond submarine hulls to support systems and experimental platforms, helping to maintain the Navy's global edge in undersea warfare.

Mare Island also became a center for nuclear maintenance, refueling, and overhauls, complex operations requiring extensive decontamination, reactor expertise, and environmental safety protocols. Only a small handful of shipyards in the world had the capability or clearance to handle such work.

4. A Quiet End to a Long War

In December 1989, a historic summit unfolded aboard the Soviet cruise ship *Maxim Gorky*, moored firmly off the coast of Malta. There, President George H. W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev met to discuss a world tipping into a new era. Though safely docked in Marsaxlokk Harbour, the ship was tossed by storm swells and buffeted by turbulent winds, conditions that mirrored the geopolitical upheaval underway, as Cold War certainties gave way to fragile possibilities. Within this tempestuous setting, Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, Chief of the Soviet General Staff, handed the Americans a classified map of U.S. submarine patrol patterns and stated bluntly, "We quit."

This was no mere diplomatic overture; it was a stark admission of strategic defeat. By revealing that Soviet intelligence had failed to track the American submarine force, Akhromeyev acknowledged the overwhelming advantage held by the U.S. Navy's undersea fleet. The map served as both a confession and a concession: a visual testament to the futility of continued military rivalry beneath the waves. Much of that invisible fleet had been launched or maintained at Mare Island, and its success rendered the Soviet deterrent ineffective. It was a quiet but decisive Cold War victory, one that had been years in the making, beneath the shifting tides and silent waters of the world's oceans. And it stood as a profound reflection of the labor and ingenuity of tens of thousands of Mare Island shipyard workers who designed, built, and maintained these vessels with meticulous precision, as well as the resolve and professionalism of the submariners who sailed them into the deep. Together, they formed a silent alliance of steel and courage, unseen yet unmistakably present at the inflection point of history.



Presidents George HW Bush and Mikhail S. Gorbachev shake hands aboard the Russian Cruise Ship Maxim Gorki during the Malta summit in December 1989. The smiles would prove genuine as the event marked the symbolic end of the Cold War

5. From Strategic Asset to Surplus Property; A Victim of Its Success

But victory came at a price. As the Cold War ended, the political support for maintaining a massive naval industrial complex collapsed alongside the Berlin Wall. Defense budgets shrank. Strategic priorities shifted. And in the 1993 round of the BRAC process, Mare Island Naval Shipyard was selected for closure.

In 1996, after 142 years of continuous operation, Mare Island officially shut its gates.

The closure was not a reflection of failure, but of success. The Cold War had been won, in part, by the quiet work of Mare Island's submariners, engineers, and craftsmen, many of whose achievements remained classified and uncelebrated. Their legacy was not one of visible triumph, but of sustained deterrence, silent presence, and strategic mastery.

By the time of its decommissioning, during the Cold War Mare Island had:

- Built 17 nuclear submarines (plus 27 diesel powered submarines from 1927 to 1972)
- Supported ballistic missile and surveillance programs
- Carried out classified intelligence operations that helped shape global history
- Overhauled and refueled dozens of nuclear-powered submarines and surface vessels, extending their operational life and strategic reach
- Dispatched “tiger teams” of engineers and technicians to naval bases worldwide to perform emergency repairs on aircraft carriers, cruisers, and destroyers
- Conducted complex maintenance and upgrades to naval reactor systems, often under extreme time constraints and security protocols
- Provided technical oversight and remote support for nuclear propulsion systems across the fleet
- Served as a training hub for nuclear-qualified personnel, including reactor operators and engineering officers
- Maintained a rapid-response capability for battle-damaged vessels returning from Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, and other theaters of operation
- Played a key role in the Navy's transition to digital diagnostics and remote monitoring of shipboard systems

What ended in 1996 was not just a shipyard, it was a chapter in American naval dominance that spanned a century and a half.

G. Legacy and Impact

Across nearly a century and a half, Mare Island Naval Shipyard was more than a workplace or military installation, it was a force. It shaped lives, influenced wars, drove innovation, and helped forge the identity of the U.S. Navy throughout the vast Pacific Ocean. Its legacy is written not only in steel and stone, but in the hearts of the people who built it, worked there, or called Vallejo home.

Mare Island built more than ships, it built families, communities, and livelihoods. The shipyard's payroll was a driving force in the local economy, circulating through Vallejo and beyond. In 1994 alone, workers brought home about \$96 million in Vallejo and another \$133 million across Solano and Napa counties. (That Vallejo figure alone equals more than \$216 million in today's dollars.) Add to that the economic multiplier effect of the shipyard's massive spending on goods, services, contractors, and machinery, and it's clear that Mare Island didn't just support the Navy, it fueled a regional economy.

Like the Army's storied "long gray line," Mare Island had its own unbroken procession of shipbuilders. Generations of shipfitters, pipefitters, welders, engineers, drafters, and sailors found purpose within its gates. Fathers worked alongside sons, mothers trained daughters, and friendships deepened over decades of shared shifts.

The daily rhythms of the yard, the clang of steel, the roar of engines, the whistle announcing a new watch, were the soundtrack of a community bound by industry, service, and pride. Today, those echoes linger as a reminder of an era of American defense and craftsmanship now fading into memory.

The yard's innovations helped win wars. Its submarines patrolled the darkest depths of the Pacific. Its shipwrights converted concepts into tools of strategy. Its welders and electricians adapted to the demands of new warfare, from steam to steel, from oil to atoms. Mare Island was where the Navy's future was built, long before it reached the sea.



Outside Machinists in 1924
*Generations of workers labored at Mare Island over its
142 years of service to the nation. (Image: Public
Domain)*

1. A City Forged by Service

Mare Island and Vallejo were inextricably linked. As the shipyard expanded, so did the city, economically, culturally, and demographically. During World War II, Mare Island's 24-hour operations fueled a population boom. Housing projects, schools, businesses, and entire neighborhoods sprang up to support the workforce.



Capt. John Cavender, the final commander of Mare Island Naval Shipyard, departs Morton Field following the base's emotional closing ceremony on April 1, 1966

This marked the end of over a century of naval tradition and shipbuilding excellence. (Photo Credit Sue Lemmon)

But Vallejo's story was also one of transformation. The shipyard became one of the first major employers on the West Coast to integrate its workforce. Beginning with World War I women entered industrial trades. African Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, and immigrants of all backgrounds gained footholds in previously inaccessible skilled labor sectors. Mare Island, by necessity and design, became a crucible of change.

That diversity endured long after the world wars. Today, Vallejo ranks among the most diverse cities in America, a living testament to the opportunities Mare Island made possible and the barriers it helped erode.

1. Memory, Heritage, and Renewal

When Mare Island Naval Shipyard closed in 1996, it left behind more than aging drydocks and shuttered workshops. It left behind a memory, deep, complicated, and rich with purpose, pride, innovation, and sacrifice. Without renewal, that memory is ephemeral. It risks fading within a few generations, just as the physical site, with its historic architecture and rusting cranes, slowly yields to time. These tangible remnants once stood as bold evidence of American maritime dominance. But memory does not preserve itself. It needs caretakers.

Organizations like the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation, the Vallejo Museum, Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve, and the Vallejo Navy League have worked tirelessly to protect this legacy. They've fought not just for buildings, but for stories, for recognition of what Mare Island meant to the nation, and to the generations who labored there in service to something greater than themselves.

One of those stories belongs to Rear Admiral Leonard “Butch” Dollaga, a Vallejo native whose journey from Hogan High School to the U.S. Naval Academy and onward to command Navy submarine units began within sight of Mare Island’s waterfront. As a young boy, Dollaga walked the shoreline with his family, captivated by the submarines across the strait. Years later, while serving aboard the USS *Los Angeles* (SSN-688), he witnessed firsthand Mare Island’s skilled shipyard workforce during a critical overhaul in the early 1990s. In 2022, Dollaga returned to speak at the MINC and reflected on the legacy of those who came before him. *“I know that I am standing on the shoulders of giants,”* he said. *“It is not lost on me that many of my opportunities came because of the people before me.”* His presence and words underscore the deep, enduring bond between Mare Island’s past and the Navy’s present.

The restoration of the MINC stands as a powerful expression of that commitment, not a retreat from the past, but an embrace of it. The same principles that guided shipbuilding, precision, respect, and duty, now guide preservation. Through civic resolve and federal stewardship, Mare Island is reclaiming its rightful place, not only in naval history, but in the nation's collective memory

Congressman John Garamendi reminded the community, *“We cannot think about today without remembering yesterday,”* a call to action that underscores the importance of preserving not just the site, but the spirit of Mare Island.

2. Looking Ahead

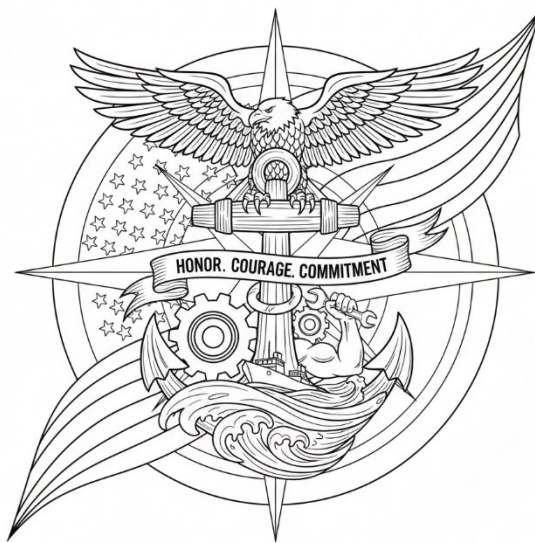
At the time of this writing, nearly 30 years have passed since the closure of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard. Several master developers have come and gone, one filing for bankruptcy, as did the City of Vallejo in 2014. While a specific plan guiding the island’s redevelopment was adopted in March 1999, that plan is now being reworked by the current master developer, most recently in a draft submitted in October 2024. That draft reflected up to 14,000 homes and 14,900–17,000 jobs, but with the slow development progress, the long-term future of the island remains unclear.

Redevelopment progress has proceeded gradually and has been constrained by disagreements over responsibility for backbone infrastructure, particularly the island's aging sewage system. A 2025 report from the Vallejo Flood and Wastewater District highlights severely degraded sanitary sewer pipes, many over 60 years old, and notes that despite developer contracts specifying infrastructure responsibilities, the Mare Island Company, the Vallejo Sanitation and Flood Control District, and the city disagree on who must remediate the system.

Moreover, an Infrastructure Assessment Project presented in 2024 projects that while initial growth may begin as early as 2027, full build-out, including adequate infrastructure to support development, may not be realized until 2063. This lengthy timeline suggests that redevelopment is unlikely to reach the historic buildings at the island’s core for another two decades, or even longer, raising legitimate, fact-based concerns about the potential decline of these landmark structures in the meantime.

Today, some former shipyard buildings are home to small businesses, artists' studios, and educational institutions. The island is being reinvented, yet its past remains both visible and relevant. Preserving Mare Island's history is more than an act of nostalgia; it preserves hard-earned lessons about resilience, civic leadership, and the changing nature of national service. With the right vision, Mare Island and its infrastructure could also once again contribute meaningfully to the Nation's defense.

That possibility is gaining renewed attention because the United States now faces a growing shipyard capacity crisis, the result of policy decisions in the 1980s and 1990s, prolonged underinvestment, workforce shortages, aging facilities, and a widening gap between fleet requirements and industrial output. Both public naval shipyards and private yards are contending with maintenance backlogs, production delays for submarines and surface ships, and limited surge capacity at a time of rising strategic competition and operational demand. Leaders in both parties increasingly recognize that naval readiness depends not only on ships and crews, but on the industrial base that builds, repairs, and sustains them. In response, bipartisan legislation, including the SHIPS for America Act, seeks to rebuild U.S. shipbuilding and repair capability through long-term capital investment, workforce development, supply-chain strengthening, and incentives to expand domestic yard capacity. If this emerging consensus holds, Mare Island could once again become an important contributor to the industrial readiness that underpins naval combat power.



IV. The Mare Island Naval Cemetery

A. Introduction

Mare Island Naval Shipyard experienced its first death in February 1856: George Dowd, a quartermaster from USS Massachusetts, died from an undocumented cause. He was laid to rest the next day on a sloped area in the southern portion of the Naval Base, overlooking the Weapons Annex, now known as the MINC. Officially designated as a cemetery in 1858, the MINC is the oldest naval cemetery on the west coast. Over 900 individuals found their final resting place there including naval officers and sailors, marines, their family members, and other prominent civilians. Burials include veterans who served as far back as the war of 1812. Internments were discontinued in November of 1921, with a few exceptions for prearranged burials. In 1975, the MINC was nominated and listed in the National Register of Historic Places and designated a National Historic Landmark, exhibiting



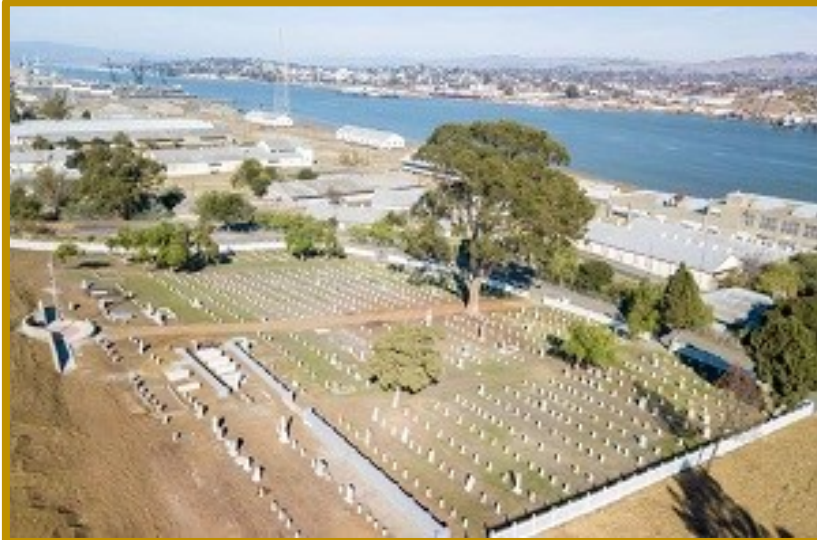
View of the Cemetery

View looking down the hill towards the Mare Island Straits circa 2019. (Photo Credit Elaine Haynes)

the importance of both the interred and the cemetery as a cultural landscape representative of significant National military history.

B. General Description

The MINC is a roughly 2.5-acre plot located on a sloping northeast-facing hillside at the southern end of Mare Island accessed by Imhoff Road. The MINC is generally a lawn-style cemetery, with simplified landscaping consisting largely of grass with ornamental trees common of post-civil war era military cemeteries. Originally much smaller, the cemetery had been expanded to the north twice, once in 1898 and once in 1910.



Aerial View of the MINC

This view of the MINC was taken following the IRT teamwork in 2020 (Photo Credit Veterans Administration – Public Domain)

painted entry gates were located at three locations. A white-painted wood kiosk displaying a map of the burial plots and a white mailbox with cemetery index information had once been exhibited at the center entryway. Yellow and pink rose bushes also line the north fenceline, which have been present since at least the 1950s with the yellow roses previously located on the inside of the fenceline and pink roses on the outside. An abundance of non-native trees and other foliage once adorned the cemetery landscape, providing shade and

The MINC was surrounded by a white-painted wooden picket fence present since at least the 1860s. Fence posts are topped with stylized wooden finials, and white-



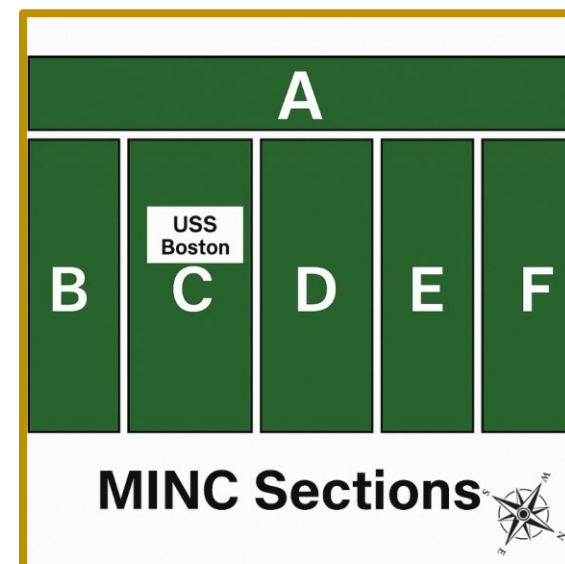
View of the MINC

This picture was taken prior to the 2019-2020 IRT Team work (Photo Credit Elaine Haynes)

ambiance for visitors. Trees brought in and planted include eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*), Monterey cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*), Australian blackwood (*Acacia melanoxylon*), and California pepper (*Schinus molle*). Landscaping efforts, including the tree planting, were undertaken largely in the 1870s and 1920s. The various trees remained present in the cemetery from their original planting until their removal in 2019 and 2020.

The MINC is separated into six sections, labeled A through F, all of which are generally separated by unpaved walking paths, with exception to Sections D and E that are directly adjacent. Section A is at the top and is oriented perpendicular to the other sections. In alignment with military culture and beliefs, Section A, at the top of the hillside and nearest to the flagpole, includes the burial plots of officers and their families. Section A is further organized by family plots separated by wrought iron fencing or concrete cradles. Section A is partially separated from the other sections with a retaining wall originally made prior to 1918 from brick and concrete parge with three buttresses on the east side. The retaining wall was next to a set of concrete parged brick stairs leading up to Section A from the pathway between Sections B and C.

Sections B, C, D, E, and F are vertically oriented on the sloped portion of the hillside. There are no separated family plots in these sections, and burials are organized generally chronologically, starting in Section B. Headstones were also placed chronologically in the rows of each of these sections according to date of passing.



C. The Headstones

Headstones within the MINC vary by section and have changed through time. Original markers were wood tablets with a Fleur-de-lis shaped top displaying the individual's name, rank, place of origin, death date, and age in white paint. These wood markers were replaced in the 20th century following the Civil War with military-style tablets established as a standard by the Army in the 1870s. These marble tablets included a relief of the Union Shield embossed with personnel name, rank, and military branch. A total of 733 headstones consist of this military-style, with just 165 non-military style markers present. Nearly all the headstones are contemporary to the historical context of Mare Island in this way, except for six headstones for Russian sailors replaced by the Russian Consul General of San Francisco in 2010. Previously the military style marble tablets common of the time, the six Russian headstones now consist of granite crosses engraved with Cyrillic.



Military tablet style headstone (Photo Credit Elaine Haynes)

The largest variety of headstones is in Section A, further representative of the difference between officers and enlisted personnel. Styles in Section A include plain arched tablet, military style tablet, block and bevel, wedge scroll, ledger, cross, obelisk, nimbus, and above ground box tomb. Headstone materials are largely marble, with some granite or concrete headstones.

Headstones in Sections B largely consist of the military style arched marble tablets, but this section also contains more large plain arched tablets or cross style headstones in addition to the six granite crosses installed by the Russian Consulate. Many headstones in Section B show significant damage, including cracks, breaks, and lichen infestation. Some also have modern repair, including concrete fills and metal joints, and some have modern bronze plaques attached to convey information unreadable on the original marker.

Sections C through F also consist largely of the military-style marble markers, with a few exceptions, including 8 blocks, 3 ledgers, 2 crosses, 1 bevel, 1 pillow, 14 pedestals, 1 wedge scroll, and 2 obelisks. Several headstones in these sections, particularly D and E, are also sinking into

the ground such that you cannot even read the name of some anymore. Two monuments are located in these sections, including the USS Boston in Section C and the USS Maryland in Section D.



*Non-military tablet style
headstone (Photo Credit Elaine
Haynes)*



*Slab style headstone (Photo
Credit Elaine Haynes)*



*Obelisk style
headstone (Photo
Credit Elaine
Haynes)*



*Ledger style
headstone (Photo
Credit Elaine
Haynes)*



View of the Original White Wooden Tablets

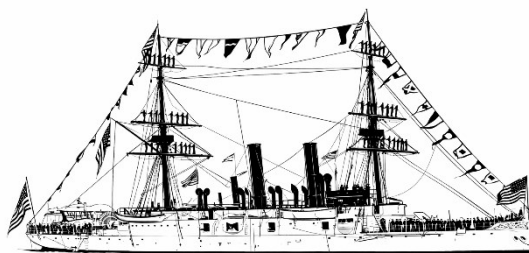
This view of the MINC was taken during the ceremony for sailors from the USS Boston who were killed in an explosion in 1892 (Photo Source: Berkeley Library Digital Collection – Public Domain)

D. Monuments



Monument to Tragedy

In 1892 18 sailors from the USS Boston were killed in an explosion (Photo Credit Berkley Library Digital Collection – enhanced – Public Domain)



THE SAILOR'S MONUMENT.

Unveiled at Mare Island Cemetery Yesterday.

The Beautiful Memorial of the Officers and Men of the Cruiser Boston to the Memory of Their Shipmates.

On yesterday the closing scene of the memorable magazine explosion at Mare Island on June 13 last, by which 15 lives were lost, was enacted in the little cemetery overlooking the bay on the sunny slopes of the island hills, where those who have died in the service of their country while at that port await the final rollcall.

The officers and men of the cruiser Boston announced soon after the explosion that a fund had been raised aboard ship to erect a suitable monument to the memory of their unfortunate shipmates, and on yesterday afternoon it was unveiled in the presence of all the officers and men stationed at the island, on the ships at anchor there and a large number of citizens from the neighboring town of Vallejo.

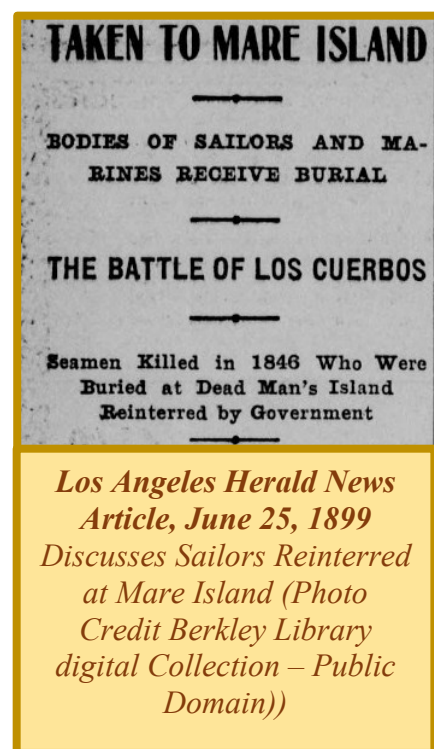
The dedication ceremonies took place at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the officers and sailors marching in procession from the navy-yard to the cemetery in the following order: Band from the flagship Independence; battalion from the cruiser Boston, under arms, consisting of: First company, marines, Lieutenant Draper commanding; second company, sailors, Lieutenant Charles

San Francisco Call News Article, August 2, 1892

Discusses the Boston Monument (Photo Credit Berkley Library digital Collection – Public Domain)

The USS Boston Monument, erected by their shipmates to honor and commemorate the sailors who perished in an explosion while serving aboard the cruiser in 1892. The monument consists of a large marble pedestal topped with an ornate finial and lying on a stepped base. The inscription reads: “USS Boston in memory of their shipmates who were killed on Mare Island 13 June 1892. The following were killed: John H. Hulton, William Heckel, William Ostrander, John Brisco, Henry Joos, George Hittinger, Thomas Seymour, C.O.L. Sundburg, William Rush, Frank Legat, John Johnson, William Washburn, Anton Ketvell, Richard Reinke, C. W. Smith. Burials were done on June 15, 1892.” In front of the monument lies individual headstones for each of the deceased.

This monument symbolizes both the dangers of naval service in peacetime and shipmate’s commitment to memorialize its sailors. The USS Boston Monument not only anchors Section C of the cemetery but also reflects a period when the Navy sought to assert its global presence, and when Mare Island served as a hub for maintaining that expanding fleet.



The USS Maryland Monument memorializes the loss of five sailors, William Eurich, Thomas Howard, Napoleon Martin, George Hruby, and Robert Delmith. On April 2, 1910, four boiler tubes exploded aboard the cruiser USS Maryland leading to the immediate death of one man and serious injury of another. In the attempts to extinguish the fires and rescue their shipmates, one fireman perished and another sustained scalding injuries. The headline of the San Francisco Call at the time read “INJURED SAILOR DRAGS HIS UNCONSCIOUS MATE FROM CRUISTER’S STEAMFILLED FIREROOM.” The monument, erected by the shipmates of the deceased, was designed and cut in Healdsborough, Ohio from Barry Marble and lies at the top of Section D, further exhibiting the selfless and patriotic acts of servicemembers, even during peacetime.

E. Who is Buried at MINC?

Active-duty personnel and veterans have been interred at the MINC through the Civil War, Spanish American War, and World War I as well as several other significant events, such as the Samoa Crisis and Apia Cyclone of 1889 and the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Patriots from all over the United States served on Mare Island, representing a number of countries of origin, including Ireland, England, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Russia, Scotland, Canada, Philippines, Denmark, France, Wales, Finland, and others. Most individuals laid to rest at MINC were not local and did not have nearby relatives. Consequently, many non-military headstones include a version of the phrase ‘erected by his shipmates’ reflecting the intense comradery experienced in the military as well as the importance of honoring the fallen during their service; a sentiment that continues to this day.

A number of veterans were also reinterred in the MINC, finding formal and respectful burials they previously had not received. Some include those who served as far back as the War of 1812, and six burials include veterans who fought and died during the Mexican-American War in 1846. In addition, foreign military service members who died while in the area are also buried at MINC, including those from Russian, French, British, and Dutch militaries.



Combat Veteran Motorcycle Association volunteering to record headstones (Photo Credit Elaine Haynes)

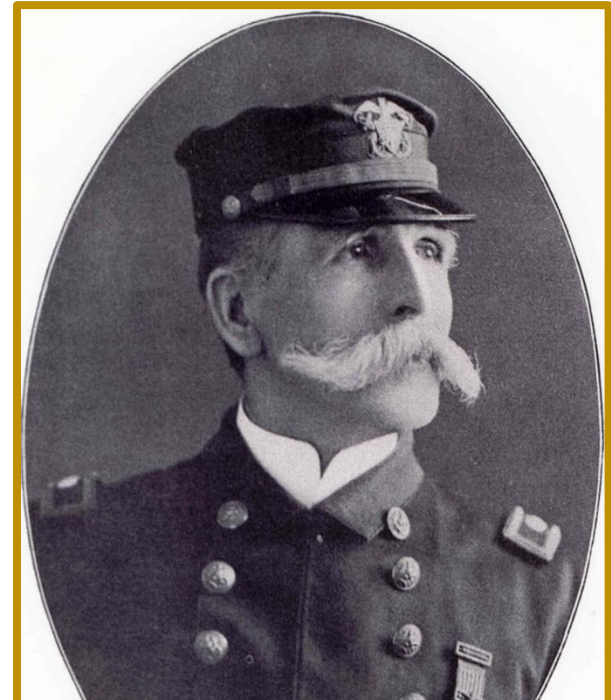
F. Medal of Honor Recipients

Four Congressional Medal of Honor recipients are at rest within the MINC. The distinguished medal of honor recipients include Boatswain's Mate Alexander Parker, Private James Cooney, Chief Gunner William Halford and Landsman John Enright.

Alexander Parker—Alexander Parker served in the United States Army and Navy for a total of 47 years, including serving in the Civil War and Spanish American War. In 1876, Parker saved a shipmate from drowning at Mare Island. For his efforts and bravery, he was awarded the Medal of Honor that same year. For his exemplary service, Parker was also awarded the Navy Spanish Campaign Medal and the West Indies Naval Campaign Medal. Parker retired in 1900 and died of heart disease later that same year. He was laid to rest in the MINC without proper recognition as a Medal of Honor recipient for over 100 years. In 2006, the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation identified the error. After notifying the Medal of Honor Society, the MINC hosted a ceremony placing a bronze plaque in front of his headstone to recognize Parker's contributions and accomplishments during his service.

James Cooney—James Cooney served in the US Marine Corps since 1899. Cooney fought during the Boxer Rebellion in the trenches of Tien Tien in 1900 under Colonel R.L. Meade. His distinguished conduct led Meade to recommend Cooney for the Medal of Honor, which he was awarded in 1901. Cooney then came to serve on Mare Island, where he died of a head injury in 1903. Cooney's service during the Boxer Rebellion was apparently so impactful that Colonel Meade took personal responsibility for the burial and ceremony, ensuring that Cooney's service during the Boxer Rebellion and receipt of the Medal of Honor were memorialized in his marble headstone.

William Halford—William Halford served in the US Navy since the 1870s. Halford received the Medal of Honor in 1870 for rescuing the crew members of the USS Saginaw. The USS Saginaw was the first ship launched at Mare Island in 1859. It sailed for Pacific duty in 1860 and wrecked on a coral reef near Kure Atoll in 1870. Halford was one of the five volunteers who responded to rescue the stranded crew and the only one who survived after 31 days at sea. He successfully rescued the crew of the Saginaw, who had survived on monk seals, albatross,



*William Halford
Medal of Honor Winner (Photo
Congressional Medal of Honor Society –
Public Domain))*

and rainwater. Halford had been retired for 15 years before returning to active duty in 1919 on Mare Island to support the United States in World War I, though he was in his 70s at the time. Halford passed away in his home in Piedmont that same year, and he was buried at the MINC with full recognition of his honorable service.

John Enright— John Enright served in the United States Navy during the late nineteenth century and distinguished himself through repeated acts of lifesaving heroism. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1863, Enright earned the Medal of Honor for his actions on January 18, 1886, while serving aboard the USS *Ranger* off Ensenada, Mexico. When two shipmates, Ordinary Seamen John Bell and George Svensson, were swept overboard, Enright immediately jumped into the water and rescued both men from drowning. For this act of extraordinary bravery, he received the Medal of Honor during the “Interim” period between major conflicts.

Following his recognized heroism in 1886, Enright continued to demonstrate remarkable courage throughout his naval service. He later served aboard the USS *Trenton* during the devastating Samoan hurricane of 1889, where he again helped save lives amid catastrophic conditions. Later that same year, while stationed at Mare Island, Enright drowned in Vallejo Harbor after attempting yet another rescue when a small boat from the USS *Albatross* capsized. A champion swimmer who had earned government swimming medals, Enright died as he had lived, risking his life to save others.

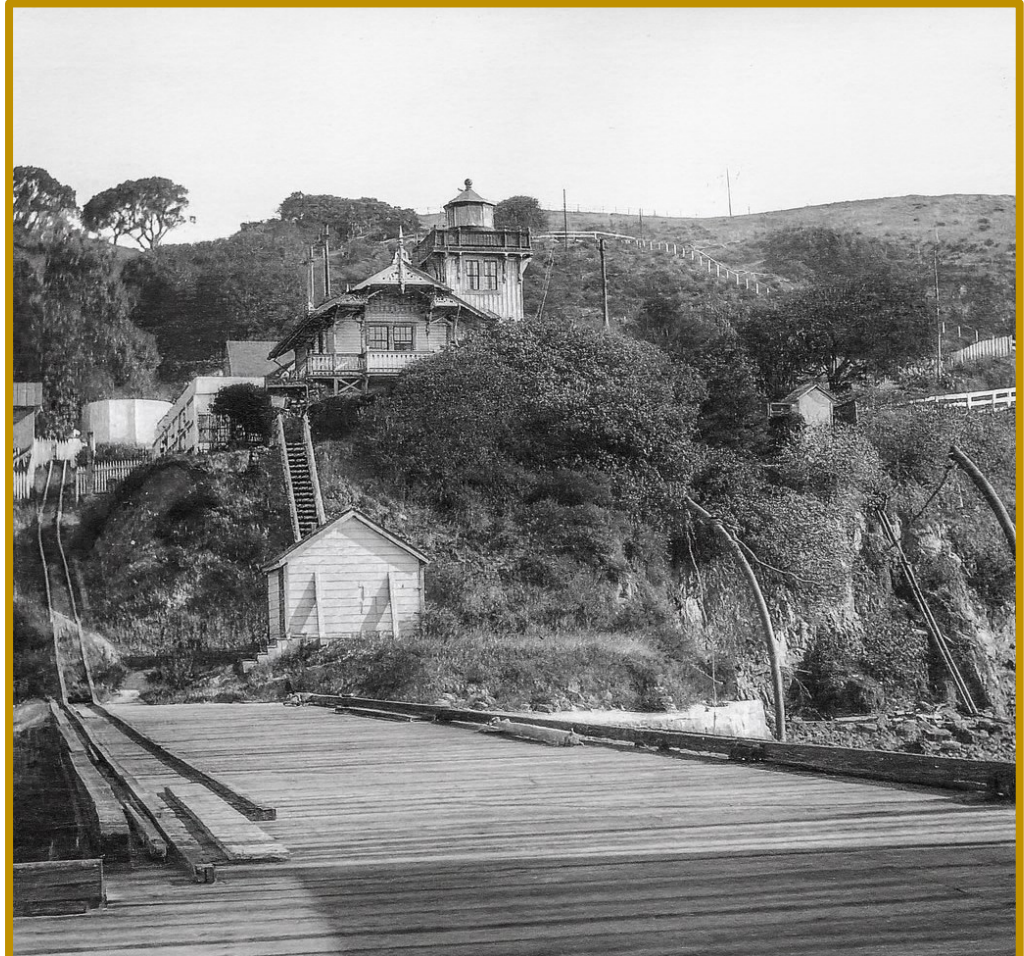
Enright was buried in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery in Section C, Row 12, Plot 072. For more than a century, his Medal of Honor status was unknown locally, as shipyard and chaplain records documented only his later lifesaving deeds in Samoa and Mare Island. In 2026, research by Mare Island historians and confirmation from the Congressional Medal of Honor Society established that the John Enright interred at Mare Island was indeed the same sailor who received the Medal of Honor in 1886. This discovery makes Enright the fourth Medal of Honor recipient buried at the Mare Island Naval Cemetery. Efforts are now underway to secure a proper Medal of Honor plaque and ensure that his grave is marked with the full recognition his service and sacrifice deserve.

G. Prominent Families

Several prominent families, including the Turner family, the McDougal family, and the MacKenzie family, are also laid to rest at the MINC. Each family included at least one individual who made significant contributions to the success of the Mare Island Naval Yard and in military history.

The Turner family—Daniel Turner, his wife Anna Arnold Key Turner, and three of their children are buried in Section A in the above ground box tombs. The Turner family holds special significance in naval history at Mare Island. Daniel Turner (1796 - 1860), a West Point graduate, War of 1812 veteran, and son of North Carolina Governor James Turner, was the Mare Island Shipyard's first civil engineer, constructing many of the first buildings. His wife, Anna Arnold Key Turner (1811 - 1884), daughter of Francis Scott Key - author of "The Star-Spangled Banner" - was among Vallejo's first public school teachers. In this way, both Daniel Turner and Anna Arnold Key Turner link the MINC to significant military and civilian history and the city's very beginnings, making the resting place of them and their children a rare intersection of military, political, cultural, and educational heritage.

The McDougal family— The entire McDougal family has a strong history with Mare Island, making major contributions to the community and the shipyard. The McDougal family's plot at the MINC intertwines the military history with its lighthouse legacy. Charles McDougal was the son of the Captain Douglas McDougal, who served as Commandant of Mare Island from 1864 to 1866. Following his father's legacy, Charles McDougal served in the Navy for nearly 30 years after graduating the Naval Academy in 1856. During his military service, Charles McDougal served on the Saginaw as a lieutenant, was later promoted to lieutenant commander in 1862 to support the gulf blockading squadron during the Civil War, commanded the steamer Comanche and later the Saco, and finally was assigned ordnance duty at Mare Island. Charles McDougal's final assignment on Mare Island was as Lighthouse Inspector for the 12th Naval District. It was in



***The Mare Island Lighthouse**
Kate McDougal was the lighthouse keeper for 30 years (Photo US Coastguard – Public Domain))*

the midst of his duties for the lighthouse that Charles McDougal was drowned in 1881. In the tragedy of his passing, his wife Katherine Coffee McDougal, now a widow with four children, was appointed as keeper of the Mare Island Lighthouse. Katherine C. McDougal diligently raised her children while tending to the many lighthouse duties. She homeschooled all four of her children, being unable to leave the lighthouse unattended on constant watch for fog.

Katherine C. McDougal was so well regarded that the officers of Mare Island gifted her a brand new telephone (just invented) one Christmas. She retired in 1916 after 30 years of lighthouse duties, and passed away in 1932 at a friend's home where she lived in retirement. Commander Charles John McDougal and his wife Katherine Coffee McDougal are buried together, side by side in a family plot in Section A of the MINC surrounded by a concrete cradle with a concrete step entrance. Both headstones are wedged granite blocks with polishing on the display and the outer edges left raw and unpolished.

The MacKenzie family—Chief Gunner Allan S. MacKenzie, his wife Malvina (Melvina), and their daughters Dorothy and Mildred are among the most poignant burials at the MINC. Allan MacKenzie was killed when a black-powder magazine exploded at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard on the morning of July 9, 1917; six people died and 31 were injured. Contemporary reports and later summaries long attributed the blast to German sabotage (often linked to agent Lothar Witzke), but the Navy's official investigation never proved sabotage, and recent scholarship argues the more likely cause was a non-enemy incident (possibly a suicide by a civilian inside the magazine). The MacKenzies' home, adjacent to the depot, was obliterated in the blast, and the four were laid to rest together at the MINC, where their graves still anchor the cemetery's narrative of wartime peril and community loss. The MacKenzie family grave plot lies in Section A of the MINC. The four family members are side-by-side with military style tablet markers surrounded by a concrete outline enclosing them together.

H. Animals at MINC

Mike the Bear (Anteater)—Mike, the pet anteater of the USS *Bennington*. Originally from Acapulco, Mexico, the name 'Mike the Bear' is likely a mistranslation from the Spanish word for anteater (oso hormiguero or anthill bear). Mike the Bear survived a boiler explosion in 1905 that killed 62 sailors and injured 40 others, but was tragically killed on Mare Island the very same year. Reports indicate that he was buried at the MINC near Victor Manaks (unrelated to the *Bennington*) in Section A, but his burial is not marked. The story of Mike the Bear demonstrates the camaraderie felt by those buried at MINC, even when they were not human.

Captain Goss' Dogs—Captain Nelson H. Goss was the Officer in Charge of the Ordnance and Ammunition Depot at Mare Island Naval Shipyard during World War II. Goss graduated from the Naval Academy in 1905 and the Naval War College in 1922, then went on to command 15 different vessels. Goss received the Navy Cross for World War I action as well as the Navy E award for his command of the ammunition depot. However, Goss is best known today for his role in the Port Chicago Magazine Explosion. Goss set the munitions loading goals that led to rushed and unsafe working conditions, resulting in a large explosion that caused the death of 320 sailors, most of whom were

black due to the segregation of duties at the time. The bronze plaque for Goss' dogs is located just outside the cemetery boundary in the east, next to an added swing gate because he was not allowed to bury them within the cemetery boundaries. It reads 'Faithful Dogs of Capt. Goss Who Have Earned an Undisturbed Rest 1941.'

I. Causes of Death

While many causes of death are unknown, by far most (226) individuals laid to rest at the cemetery died from medical reasons rather than in battle. Directly after WWI, in September 1918, Mare Island and Vallejo were hit with Spanish Influenza, leading to a two-month quarantine and 87 dead. Other common illnesses included consumption (now known as tuberculosis), aneurysm, Bright's disease (now known as nephritis or kidney disease), heart disease, and pneumonia. Other major death events represented in MINC include drowning or other accidents such as overdose, and unfortunately suicide and murder. Just 23 individuals in MINC were killed in action during a conflict. Still, every individual laid to rest at MINC died in the line of duty and were active or retired military or made significant contributions to the success of the Naval Base.

J. Closure

In 1921, Rear Admiral Josiah S. McKean took command of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard. He wished the cemetery would be removed and the bodies reinterred at the National Cemetery of San Francisco. The land was then meant to be used to expand the Naval Ammunitions Depot. Admiral McKean, the Bureau of Ordnance, and the National Cemetery of San Francisco agreed to the project, leading McKean to order that no burials should take place at Mare Island Cemetery after November 1, 1921. Subsequently, the cemetery was officially "abandoned" on March 2, 1922, in expectation of the removal. Funds were not made available to conduct the removal and reburials in San Francisco. McKean was first denied funding on December 23, 1921, with a recommendation to reapply the following fiscal year. He was denied again on June 29, 1923, by the Chief of Naval Operations A. H. Robertson, who stated, "The Department, while recognizing the necessity of eventually transferring the Naval Cemetery from its present location within the Naval Ammunition Depot limits, does not consider it desirable to inaugurate the transfer at the present time.". Attempts to obtain funding for the removal of MINC to the National Cemetery of San Francisco continued through 1944. The new Admiral, G. W. Laws continued to deny future burials on the basis that the cemetery would be removed in the near future. Both the Bureau of Yards and Docks and the Bureau of Surgery and Medicine of Washington D.C. continually denied requests for funding, always suggesting renewing the request for future fiscal quarters. No funding for the removal and reinternment was ever approved, and MINC fell into serious disrepair as a result.

K. Falling into Disrepair

MINC suffered deeply as a result of its abandonment. Rather than receiving regular maintenance, the assumed movement of the cemetery left weeds to grow and headstones to tarnish. As funding for reinternment was denied year after year, disagreement between the shipyard and the naval hospital regarding the responsibility for the cemetery upkeep continued to the 1950s. Over time, confusion only grew regarding which department was responsible for the maintenance and care of MINC, and MINC saw only limited care.

A letter on November 21, 1928, to the Naval Hospital from Admiral Laws details orders to remove dead vegetation and rubbish, realign markers whose foundations were undermined, and resurface sunken gravestones. However, funds weren't made available to complete this work until 1929, when the Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery approved funds of \$1,000 from Appropriation 79806 "Care of the Dead" for rehabilitation of the cemetery. However, only \$500 were used for rehabilitation, and the remaining \$500 was deemed "unobligated" and is presumed to have been utilized for other projects. In addition, several requests were made in 1934 for special allotment to clean headstones, redress letters for legibility, straighten and align the headstones, level and plumb 25 monuments, and renew the fencing. MINC continued to fall into disrepair under Commandant M. S. Tisdale through the 1940s, as the only funding available to maintain it came from the Naval Hospital in the form of a measly \$100 a year to clean the cemetery prior to Memorial Day events. As one letter from November 18, 1945, details, there was great difficulty in finding an individual headstone in "the tangled growth of weeds."

The next major renovations were completed in 1956 in the form of aligning 125 headstones, fixing the bases for 28 headstones, adding fill soils to 85 headstone bases, and repairs to the fence and flagpole. Nearly a decade later, additional maintenance was conducted to clear the area and construct a speaker's platform for Memorial Day services. Since 1971, volunteer efforts by local families and veterans groups help maintain and clean the cemetery annually for Memorial Day services and, beginning in 1996 bi-annually when Veterans Day ceremonies were added. However, this left the remainder of the year for weeds to grow and headstones to tarnish with lichen infestation or sink from soil slumpage caused by poor drainage.

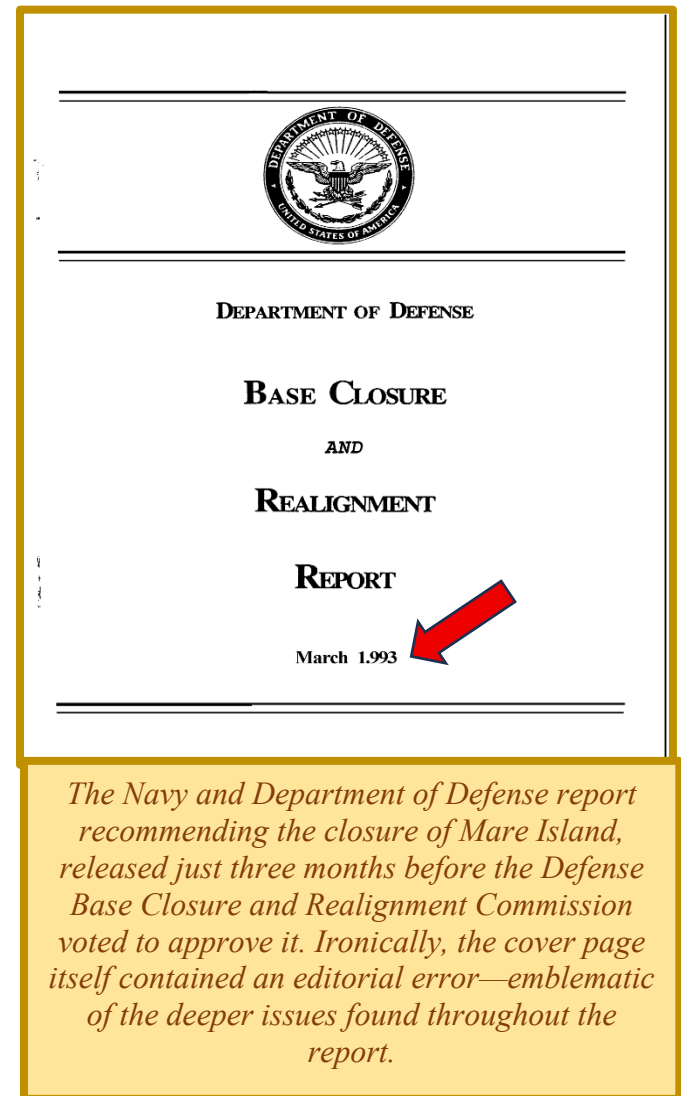
V. The BRAC Reckoning: Strategic Oversight and Forgotten Sacrifice

The 1993 BRAC Commission initiated a dramatic restructuring of U.S. naval infrastructure under the guise of fiscal responsibility and post–Cold War efficiency. Framed as a nonpartisan and analytical process, BRAC instead exposed the consequences of political expedience and bureaucratic detachment, particularly in the case of Mare Island Naval Shipyard.

BRAC’s stated goal was to eliminate redundancy, cut excess capacity, and streamline military installations. However, the process bypassed key oversight mechanisms such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), weakening its ability to fully evaluate the long-term cultural, environmental, and strategic impact of closures. Once the Department of Defense (DoD) submitted closure recommendations, the BRAC Commission had limited power to challenge them, resulting in many decisions being rubber-stamped with minimal scrutiny.

At the helm and driving the Navy’s 1993 BRAC execution were Charley Nemfakos and Sean O’Keefe, civilian bureaucrats with financial backgrounds rather than operational or technical expertise. Their cost-driven philosophy prioritized consolidation and "megaports" over geographic redundancy and industrial resilience. Critical warnings from NAVSEA analysts about drydock availability, workforce expertise, and readiness were largely ignored. The BRAC process became more about retrofitting data to justify predetermined outcomes than conducting impartial analysis.

Mare Island’s closure lays bare the fatal flaws of BRAC’s framework. Capacity was measured using “maximum theoretical” estimates that were riddled with inconsistencies. Mare Island’s numbers were artificially inflated by assuming an unrealistic three-shift model and by counting off-site workloads, distortions that masked its true standing relative to other yards. Worse still, the analysis ignored strategic factors altogether,



including Mare Island's classified Ocean Engineering program and its critical West Coast location, skewing its Military Value assessment.



Not swayed by Mare Island supporters' presentation of errors of fact and omission in the Navy's recommendations, the Commissioners voted unanimously on June 26, 1993, to close Mare Island with one commissioner abstaining. The closure of half of the Nation's Public shipyard capacity coupled with the decline of the private shipyard capacity beginning in the 1980's created a decades long loss of needed domestic shipyard capacity which continues to this day.

The result was a capacity plan untethered from reality. BRAC claimed to preserve enough shipyard infrastructure to support a fleet of 337 battle force ships. Yet in practice, even with the fleet languishing below 300 ships since 2003, the surviving yards have been unable to keep pace with required construction and repair. The consequences became stark by 2019, when the Navy proposed a modest expansion to 355 ships. Rear Adm. Brian Luther, then deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for budget, admitted that industrial bottlenecks were so severe the goal would not be reached until the 2050s, a half-century to achieve less than a 30 percent increase. By comparison, America's public and private yards in the 1960s could have built that increase in barely five years.

Moreover, the Cost of Base Realignment Actions (COBRA) model severely underestimated the financial burden of relocating missions, especially Mare Island's specialized Ocean Engineering capabilities to Puget Sound. Real costs exceeded COBRA estimates by nearly \$200 million, excluding critical environmental and nuclear decontamination expenses. In total, 28 documented errors and omissions in Mare Island's BRAC assessment revealed a process driven more by budget optics than operational soundness.

Beyond its industrial impact, BRAC left a lasting human and cultural scar. The MINC, the oldest of its kind on the West Coast, was completely excluded from closure analysis and decision making. With no federal agency willing to assume responsibility, it was quietly transferred to the City of Vallejo without funding and with toothless preservation mandates. Neglected for years, the cemetery's deterioration accelerated as it became a symbol of forgotten service and federal abandonment.

National security repercussions from these decisions soon emerged. By eliminating half of the Navy's public shipyards, BRAC created a critical bottleneck in repair and maintenance capacity. Incidents like the USS *Boise*'s ongoing (at the time of this writing) twelve-year

dockside delay exemplified the strategic cost of lost redundancy. Even in later BRAC rounds, proposals to close additional shipyards faced stronger resistance, reflecting a delayed recognition of earlier errors.

In conclusion, the 1993 BRAC decisions, particularly regarding Mare Island, sacrificed strategic depth and historical preservation on the altar of short-term savings. While the Navy gained fiscal flexibility in the short term, it lost reserve/surge readiness, and shipyard throughput creating an industrial capacity crisis that continues to this day. The MINC was never considered by those deciding to close Mare Island. Left to decay, it became the physical testament to a reckoning still unfolding, one where numbers eclipsed legacy, narrative trumped factual analysis and operational foresight was traded for balance-sheet triumphs.

See [Appendix B](#) for the full story about the flawed 1993 BRAC process.



VI. Custodians of Quiet Decline



This photograph shows the overgrown nature of the MINC even during the period that the Navy operated Mare Island Naval Shipyard (Image: Public Domain)

When Mare Island Naval Shipyard officially closed its gates on March 31, 1996, the transition from federal control to local stewardship began, but it began unevenly, and in many cases, ambiguously. Under the BRAC mandate, the Navy was required to dispose of the Mare Island property, either by transferring parcels to other federal, state, or local entities or by offering them for sale.

Among the properties awaiting disposition was the MINC, a site of historical and symbolic importance. Yet despite its status as a registered historic resource, the cemetery was particularly vulnerable. Unlike buildings that could be renovated or land that could be redeveloped, the cemetery offered no clear economic return. It required preservation, care, and respect, qualities difficult to fund in a climate of constrained municipal budgets and post-BRAC fatigue.

A. The Transfer, in Name Only

By the time the Navy transferred title of the cemetery to the City of Vallejo in 2001, years of deferred maintenance had already taken a visible toll. The site was marred by broken headstones, eroding slopes, damaged fencing, and invasive overgrowth. While federal documents acknowledged its cultural and historical significance, no federal agency stepped forward to accept long-term responsibility.

Though the cemetery was technically included in the Caretaker Services

Cooperative Agreement between the Navy and the City, which provided \$5 million annually (through 2001) for island-wide operations and maintenance, it received little direct attention. Maintenance became sporadic at best, and symbolic at worst.

The Department of Veterans Affairs declined to request the property during the federal real property screening process, citing longstanding policy. That policy, in place for decades, restricted the VA's responsibility to cemeteries it had either directly established or formally designated as national cemeteries. MINC, despite its historical importance and the presence of veterans among the interred, fell outside those parameters. In accordance with the federal excess property disposal process triggered by BRAC, the Navy initiated the required screening procedure, notifying all eligible federal agencies of the opportunity to assume ownership. The VA was formally contacted and invited to

request the cemetery, but it declined. Officials maintained that assuming responsibility for a non-VA military burial ground would set a precedent for hundreds of similar sites nationwide, creating what they called an unsustainable obligation.

Proponents of preserving the cemetery later challenged this position. They argued that under the National Cemeteries Act of 1973, the MINC should have been transferred from the Navy to the Administrator of Veterans' Affairs. They also demonstrated that truly comparable sites were few, underscoring Mare Island's unique historic and symbolic significance as deserving of federal stewardship.

But when no federal agency stepped forward to assume responsibility, the Navy was left with only two options under BRAC law: sell the cemetery at public auction or tie its transfer to the broader property deal with the City of Vallejo. Since no real market exists for abandoned historic cemeteries, the Navy chose the latter. In 2001, when the rest of Mare Island was conveyed to Vallejo, the cemetery was bundled into the package, its acquisition made mandatory.

1. The City's Unwanted Charge

Vallejo's role in assuming control of the cemetery was not born of civic enthusiasm, but of necessity. Because the MINC was made part of the broader property deal, the acquisition of the cemetery became a mandatory condition of the economic development conveyance which was key to allowing the redevelopment of the rest of the base. There was no viable commercial market for a historic military cemetery. No funding was provided to ensure its upkeep. In practice, following the closure of Mare Island Naval Shipyard in 1996, the City of Vallejo was left reeling. The shipyard had been the community's largest employer and economic engine for more than a century, and its loss triggered a cascade of financial hardship. Within little more than a decade, Vallejo became the first city of its size in California to declare bankruptcy, filing in 2008 under the weight of shrinking revenues and mounting obligations.

Against this backdrop, the notion that the city, still struggling to regain its footing after such a devastating economic blow, could reasonably be expected to maintain a historic naval cemetery to any acceptable standard was, frankly, unrealistic. The Mare Island Naval Cemetery, a hallowed ground of national significance, required resources and expertise well beyond the city's strained means. To leave its care in the hands of a municipality so grievously impacted by the base closure decision was not only impractical, but a disservice to the men and women interred there.

Although the Navy initially maintained the cemetery, care was sharply reduced after 1921, when officials sought to remove the graves to expand the Naval Ordnance Depot and reinter the dead at the San Francisco National Cemetery. Despite several widely spaced attempts to repair headstones, virtually no consistent maintenance followed the renewed 1927 effort to close the cemetery and relocate its burials. From that point forward, the Navy treated the cemetery less as a place of commemoration than as a legal obligation, providing only token upkeep until Mare Island itself was shuttered in 1996. With limited staffing and redevelopment priorities elsewhere, Vallejo inherited the same pattern: maintenance was minimal, trees grew unchecked, drainage systems failed, headstones cracked and toppled, and graffiti and

vandalism went largely unaddressed. The cemetery slowly disappeared into neglect, its worn appearance no longer seen as shameful, but simply... normal.

2. Keeping the Flame Alive

Yet even in decline, the MINC was never entirely forgotten.

Fearing it would fade from public memory after the Navy's departure, Vallejo Mayor Gloria Exline appealed to local veterans' groups and the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation to restore a sense of ceremonial presence. Beginning in 1996, and continuing every year since, these groups have organized Veterans Day and Memorial Day observances continuing the tradition at the MINC that goes back to 1871. Even as the cemetery's condition deteriorated, these annual rituals continued to maintain the MINC's dignity.

Though modest, these ceremonies were reverent acts of remembrance. The U.S. Naval Sea Cadets of the Rear Admiral Richard O'Kane chapter, honoring the commander of the Mare Island-built *USS Tang* (the submarine that sank the most enemy tonnage in U.S. Navy history), took on providing the Color Guard. In addition to City of Vallejo's Public Works Department, volunteers from the Mare Island Shoreline Heritage Preserve and the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation worked to tame overgrowth and keep the site open to visitors. Limited in resources but rich in purpose, their collective efforts spoke volumes about the community's determination to keep the cemetery visible, accessible, and honored.

Despite these efforts, some visitors had come to regard the cemetery's overgrown and weathered state as part of its historical authenticity, preferring the patina of age and the sense of untouched history to the manicured, regimented appearance associated with cemeteries maintained to national shrine standards.



Sea Cadets from the Rear Admiral Richard O'Kane Chapter provide the Color Guard on Veterans Day 2019. The trees in the background show fire damage from a wildfire sparked by vandals in September. (image credit Dennis Kelly)

3. International Reverence

Amid this local struggle, the cemetery's layered history continued to echo across borders. Among the nearly 900 interred were eight sailors of the Russian Imperial Navy, who died while aboard visiting warships in the late 19th century. Their presence deepened the cemetery's symbolic resonance, connecting it to an international tradition of naval diplomacy and sacrifice.

The Russian Consulate in San Francisco, recognizing this link, began offering quiet support, funding modest restoration efforts, helping replace weathered headstones through partnerships with the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation, and holding remembrance ceremonies at the MINC. These acts of foreign reverence stood in contrast to the site's domestic neglect, serving as a reminder that the cemetery's meaning extended beyond national borders.

4. A Living Memory, on the Edge

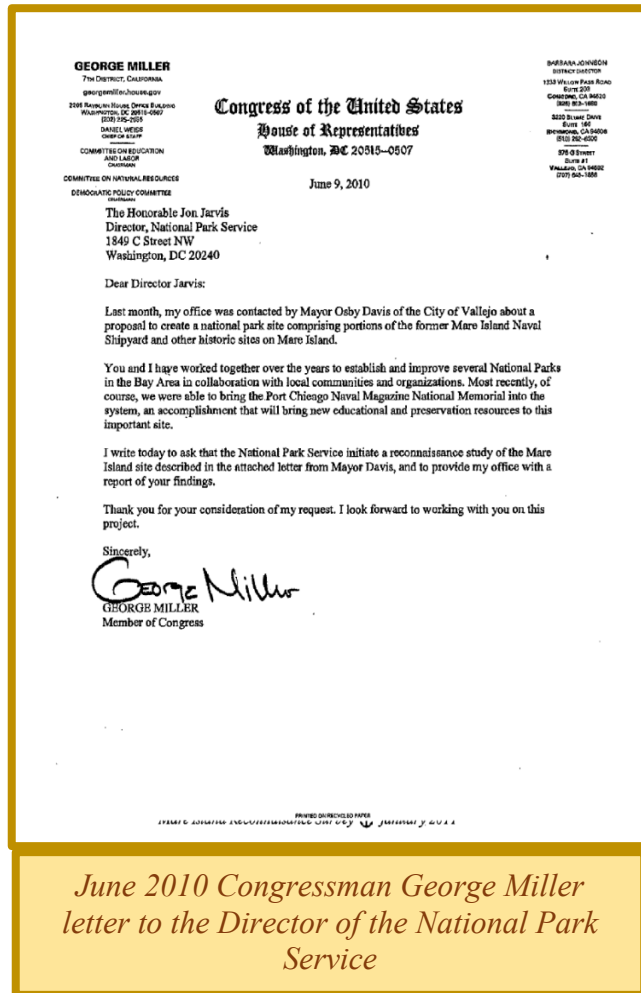
By the early 2010s, the cemetery was caught between past honor and present neglect, historic yet deteriorating, visible yet overlooked, sacred yet unfunded. Most days its gates stayed locked, opened only for special tours or commemorative ceremonies, and it slowly slipped from public memory.

And yet, the devotion of a small band of volunteers and veterans kept the flame of remembrance alive. Their quiet persistence prevented the cemetery from deteriorating entirely, holding the line until a broader awakening could take root.



VII. The NPS Effort

Beginning in 2010, recognizing the ongoing deterioration of the cemetery, the MIHPF and City of Vallejo initiated an effort to secure National Park System status for Mare Island including the MINC. That effort was long, complicated, and often frustrating. It is a story of recognition without responsibility, of grassroots determination meeting federal hesitation, and of one of America's most historic naval sites caught between reverence and neglect.



A. Early Interest and Recognition

The idea of incorporating Mare Island into the National Park System dates to the 1993 reuse planning process following the shipyard's closure order. Vallejo city leaders floated the idea with Congressman George Miller and the National Park Service (NPS). At the time, NPS staff dismissed the notion as unworkable in the political climate of a Congress intent on budget cutting.

Yet even in those years, historic advocacy officials recognized Mare Island's extraordinary national importance. In 1995, in a letter responding to the Navy's Environmental Impact Statement for the disposal and reuse of Mare Island, the NPS wrote that Mare Island's historic standing was "*equivalent to that of the Presidio of San Francisco, the Empire State Building, [and] New Orleans' French Quarter,*" and insisted that preservation should be among the highest priorities in reuse planning.

B. Congressman Miller's 2010 Request

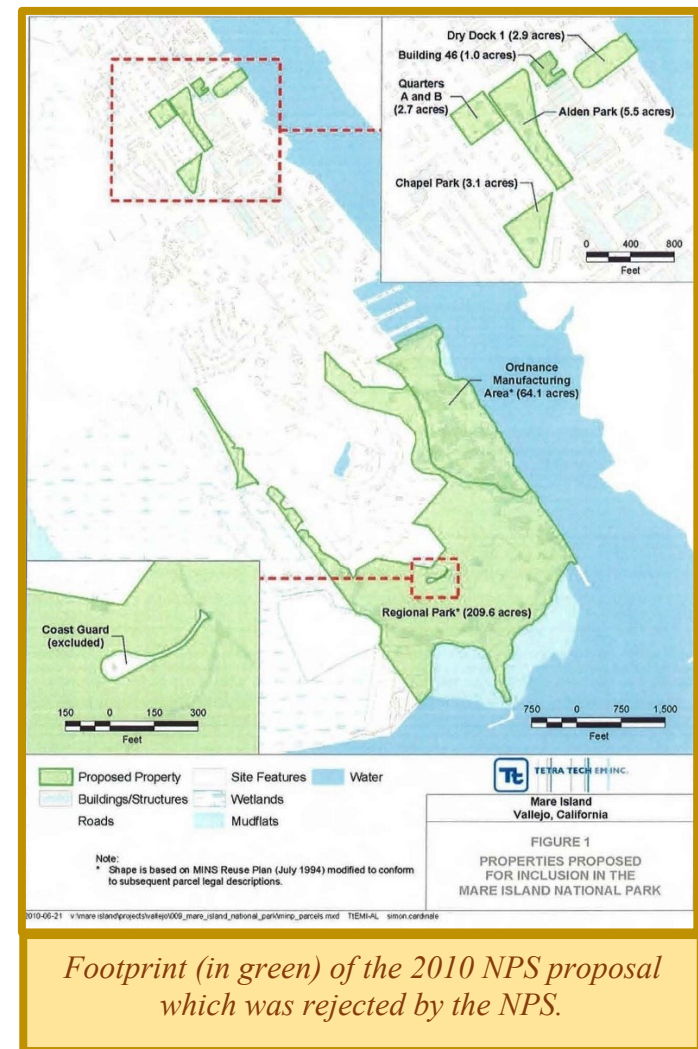
Fifteen years later, the idea resurfaced. By 2010, no public entity had stepped forward to take responsibility for the south end of Mare Island, including the cemetery, leaving its long-term future uncertain. In May of that year, the Mayor of Vallejo formally endorsed the concept of adding Mare Island to the National Park System. Acting on that momentum, Congressman George Miller submitted a request in June 2010 asking the NPS to evaluate Mare Island's historic sites through a reconnaissance survey.

That original 2010 request was broad in scope. It included not only the historic core of the shipyard but also the open space on the south end of Mare Island, including the Mare Island Naval Cemetery. The cemetery's inclusion was especially appropriate given the National Park Service's longstanding experience managing historic burial grounds such as the Gettysburg National Cemetery in Pennsylvania and the Antietam National Cemetery in Maryland. In both cases, the NPS has preserved the cultural and commemorative value of military cemeteries while integrating them into the broader historical narratives of the sites, an approach well-suited to the legacy of Mare Island.

A team of NPS resource specialists visited Mare Island in August 2010, examining landmarks such as Dry Dock #1, St. Peter's Chapel, Alden Park, and Quarters A and B, along with the National Historic Landmark district and the proposed southern open space. Their findings, transmitted back to Miller on March 11, 2011, were strikingly mixed:

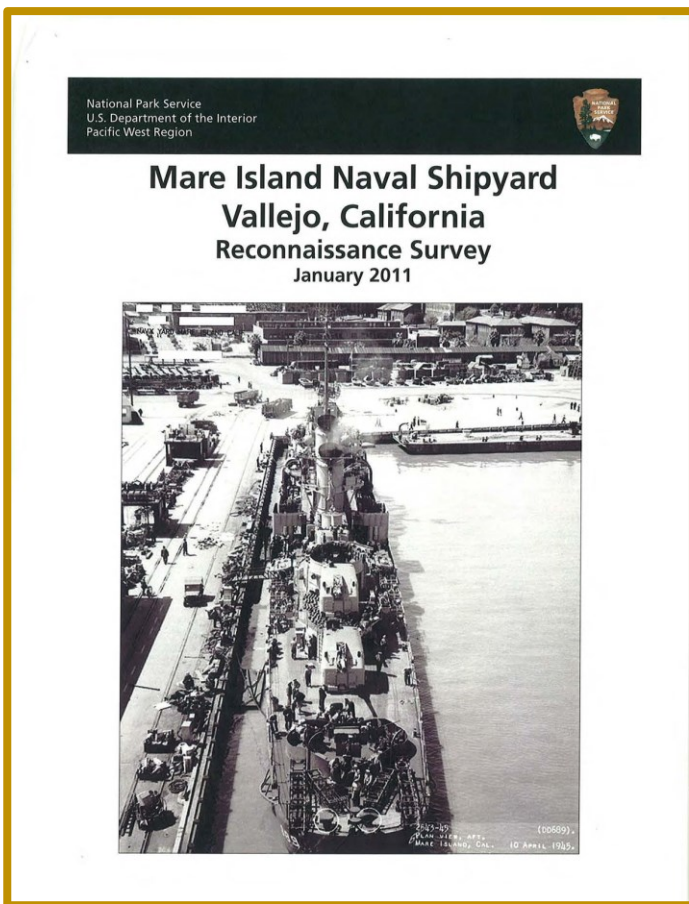
- **Significance:** Mare Island was unquestionably nationally significant, representing 142 years of naval innovation and the U.S. Navy's first permanent base on the Pacific.
- **Suitability:** Mare Island offered resources not represented elsewhere in the National Park System.
- **Feasibility:** The report concluded that NPS could not feasibly take it on. The costs of deferred maintenance, hazardous-material cleanup, and the challenge of managing historic areas interwoven with commercial and residential redevelopment made it, in their view, "unlikely feasible" as a new park unit.

Because feasibility is one of the four required criteria for park designation, the process stopped there. Miller relayed the disappointing news to Vallejo in late March 2011.



C. Local Response and Volunteer Burden

The 2011 NPS report infuriated many local advocates. On one hand, the agency had confirmed Mare Island's singular importance: "*there are no other sites that integrate these themes in the same way that Mare Island has*". On the other, it effectively abandoned the site to local care.



The 2011 NPS Reconnaissance Survey Found that it was not feasible to add Mare Island's historic areas (including the cemetery) to the National Park System

Responsibility fell again to unfunded local volunteers such as the nonprofit, MIHPF who managed St. Peter's Chapel, the shipyard museum, and historic officer's mansions. The MIHPF volunteers curated more than 4,000 Navy artifacts and tried to keep the grounds open to visitors. But by 2015, after nearly two decades, the strain was showing: despite raising over \$3 million in donations, MIHPF faced chronic negative cash flow and the threat of closure.

D. The 2015 Revised Request

Stung but undeterred, advocates regrouped. By 2015, they revised their strategy, narrowing the focus to the MINC and the Historic Core of the shipyard. Unlike the 2010 request, which had bundled the cemetery with large tracts of open space, the 2015 request deliberately scaled back to make the proposal more manageable and politically palatable.

The narrower request reflected both pragmatism and urgency. The cemetery, as the oldest naval cemetery on the West Coast, was in visible decline, fenced off most days, and increasingly at risk of irreversible loss. By focusing solely on only the cemetery on the south end of the shipyard, advocates hoped to bypass the objections raised about environmental cleanup and redevelopment conflicts elsewhere on Mare Island.

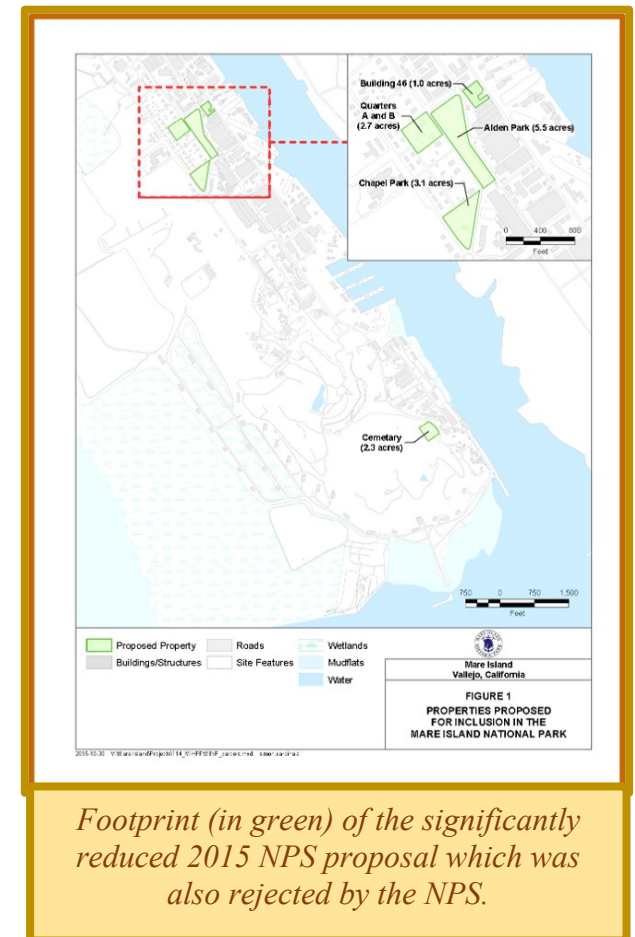
E. Renewed Advocacy and Political Strategy

In support of the 2015 push, Vallejo city leaders and MIHPF launched a new wave of advocacy. They wrote to Senators Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Ron Wyden, Angus King, Debbie Stabenow, and Martin Heinrich of the Senate Subcommittee on National Parks, urging hearings and federal action.

At the local level, the Vallejo City Council passed resolutions of support. Advocates rallied endorsements from the Naval Historical Foundation, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and retired Navy admirals. Petitions gathered hundreds of signatures. Social media campaigns sought to shift the narrative from Mare Island as a “Vallejo problem” to Mare Island as a national treasure.

What made the rejection harder to swallow was the broader landscape of preservation. Since 2000, more than thirty-nine new sites, from national monuments to marine sanctuaries, had been added to the NPS system, many with cultural or natural stories less extensive than Mare Island’s. Nearby Richmond, for example, secured Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park in 2000, ensuring federal stewardship for the legacy of the Kaiser shipyards and the women and men who labored there. As vital as that contribution was to winning World War II, it was by nature ephemeral, surging during the World War II years and then fading with peace. By contrast, Mare Island’s shipyard spanned nearly a century and a half of service, innovation, and sacrifice, shaping the Navy’s presence on the Pacific from the Civil War through the Cold War. To local advocates, Mare Island’s exclusion underscored that designation of a site as part of the National Park System is ultimately a political decision, not merely a technical one.

As one MIHPF leader put it: *“The push for it has to come from more than a few locals to energize our legislators to actually spend some political cash to make it happen.”*



Footprint (in green) of the significantly reduced 2015 NPS proposal which was also rejected by the NPS.

F. A Struggle Unfinished

By the mid-2010s, the Mare Island National Park campaign stood at a crossroads. On paper, the site met every criterion of significance and suitability. In practice, it was dismissed as infeasible. Volunteers continued to patch roofs, mow lawns, and lead tours, holding history together with devotion and duct tape.

The irony remained stark: Mare Island had been judged equivalent to icons like the Presidio yet lacked the federal champions to secure its place in the pantheon of protected American sites. The flame of the effort, though dimmed, was not extinguished. Supporters held out hope that one day the nation would see what they saw: that Mare Island's story, and especially its historic cemetery, is not just Vallejo's story, but America's story.



VIII. Breaking the Silence — The Reawakening at Mare Island

Following the failed NPS effort MINC stood in quiet decline, neglected by institutions that once revered it, and largely forgotten by a public it had long served. Tucked into the grounds of the decommissioned Mare Island Naval Shipyard, the cemetery became hidden by both geography and bureaucracy.

Access was limited. The road to the site was poorly marked and often blocked by a locked gate. Outside of a few annual observances and guided tours, few made the journey. It had become a relic, not simply historic, but out of reach.

Among those who did visit, the decay was often rationalized. Some called it an “authentic ruin,” a visual reminder of time’s passage. Others assumed its condition was simply the result of unclear jurisdiction or legal complexity. Over time, the crumbling headstones, the silence, the sagging fence lines, these things no longer shocked. They were normalized.

The slow erosion of care became a slide into abandonment. When the shipyard officially closed in 1996, the cemetery lost its last meaningful tie to institutional stewardship. What had once been neglected became something more deliberate: demolition by neglect, built into the system itself. Responsibility gave way to avoidance. No agency stepped forward. No budget line was assigned. The Navy, once stewards of both ships and sailors, quietly withdrew from the ground that held its fallen until 2017.

A. A Chance Visit, a Shocking Discovery

On September 19, 2017, a 7.1-magnitude earthquake devastated Mexico City, collapsing more than 40 buildings and killing over 370 people. In the wake of the disaster, Travis Air Force Base deployed a C-17 Globemaster III to deliver a USAID disaster response team, including search-and-rescue dogs, medical supplies, and dozens of personnel.

That humanitarian mission disrupted the routine airlift schedule, delaying a flight for retired U.S. Navy Captain Ralph Parrott and his wife, Betty, who were awaiting onward transport. With unexpected downtime and curiosity to spare, they searched for a place of interest nearby. Mare Island, just over an hour away, stood out to Ralph. Though he had never been stationed there, he knew of its historical importance.



Medjez-El-Bab War Cemetery honoring Commonwealth servicemen lost during the North African campaign of WWII
Overseas cemeteries like this one—photographed in 2005 by Capt. Ralph Parrot, USN (Ret.), in a remote corner of Tunisia—helped shape his expectations of reverence, dignity, and care in honoring military service. (image credit Ralph Parrott)

The couple made the drive, arriving with high expectations. As a career officer, Captain Parrott was familiar with the high standards maintained at Department of Veterans Affairs cemeteries and those overseas managed by the American Battle Monuments Commission. He had seen firsthand how nations honored their fallen, immaculate grounds, crisp headstones, orderly rows of reverence.

He expected the same at Mare Island.

What he found left him speechless. Some asked pointedly: Why should American veterans laid to rest overseas be honored with such care, while those buried here at home receive less?

B. A National Shame, Hidden in Plain Sight

More than 900 graves, sailors, Marines, soldiers, civilians, and four Medal of Honor recipients, sat amid overgrown brush, cracked headstones, rusted fences, and debris. The monuments were weather-stained and askew. The flagpole was bare. There were no signs of recent maintenance, no plaques offering context or care. The site, though historically significant, had the feel of abandonment.

For Parrott, the contrast between his expectations and reality was jarring. This wasn't just an oversight. It was a betrayal.

Here lay patriots who had served in war and peace, left in neglect, hidden behind locked gates and municipal indifference. The cemetery wasn't just deteriorating; it had been forgotten. And in that forgetting, the nation had broken its covenant.

“This isn't just unacceptable,” he would later say. “It's un-American.”

C. From Outrage to Action

Parrott's reaction wasn't fleeting. It was transformative.

Back in Vallejo California, Mayor Robert (Bob) Sampayan's Administrative Assistant came into his office to advise him that there was a Navy Captain on the phone who was insisting on talking to him. The caller was Capt. Parrott and his language was direct: "This is a national disgrace."

What had been quietly tolerated by many could no longer be excused. And Parrott was not alone in his outrage. As word spread, others stepped forward, veterans, preservationists, descendants of the interred, military historians, journalists, and concerned citizens. They began researching the cemetery's history, collecting legal documents, reaching out to veterans' groups, and contacting local and federal officials. Together they posted about the site online, raising awareness in veterans' forums and civic networks. They wrote to congressional offices and to the Department of Veterans Affairs, their team visited legislative offices, Navy and DoD offices, Veterans Organizations and they got on the phone.

Together, they began to form a movement.



IX. Legacy, Jurisdiction and the Long Road to Federal Stewardship

For decades, the MINC stood in institutional limbo, historically revered yet structurally neglected. The journey to restoring federal stewardship was anything but straightforward, requiring the resolution of multiple formidable obstacles:

- **Severe capital improvement needs**, with decades of deferred maintenance resulting in serious structural and accessibility deficiencies.
- **Institutional and policy resistance within the Department of Veterans Affairs**, where internal priorities and resource constraints initially hindered support for assuming responsibility.
- **Lack of clear legal authority**, necessitating Congressional action to formally authorize the cemetery's transfer and ensure its long-term care under federal stewardship.
- **Arcane legal encumbrances**, including the misapplication of California's Tidelands Trust, which complicated jurisdiction and clouded title.

A. From Federal Hands to Local Custody

In 1996, the closure of Mare Island Naval Shipyard under the BRAC process eventually led to the transfer of most of its land, including the MINC, to the City of Vallejo for economic redevelopment. This transfer was accompanied by a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) executed under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), intended to ensure the preservation of historic assets including the MINC.

The MOA, negotiated among the U.S. Navy, the City of Vallejo, and the California State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), with input from the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP), outlined preservation responsibilities for historic properties affected by the BRAC process. Though legally binding, the agreement was deeply flawed: it came with no long-term funding, no punitive enforcement provisions, and relied entirely on good faith compliance and passive oversight. In reality, no agency actively monitored the cemetery's condition, and the MOA became a hollow formality, designed more to satisfy procedural requirements under NEPA than to ensure meaningful preservation.

Initially, the City of Vallejo provided limited maintenance to MINC, supported in part by funds from the Navy's Caretaker Cooperative Agreement. However, when those funds were terminated in late 2001, the City's capacity to care for the site dwindled rapidly. From that point forward, maintenance became sporadic at best, falling largely to volunteers, veterans' groups, and civic-minded residents. Annual ceremonies and occasional cleanups kept the cemetery from complete obscurity, but institutional support had evaporated.

The federal government had exited. The City lacked resources. And what was once a proud Navy landmark had become a neglected municipal burden, sustained only by community goodwill and the determination of those who refused to let it be forgotten. The solution to ensuring that the MINC received the care and dignity it deserved appeared, at first glance, to be straightforward: transfer the property back into federal hands and place it under the long-term stewardship of the VA, an agency specifically entrusted with honoring and maintaining the final resting places of America's servicemembers.

B. Resistance from Within: The Precedent Dilemma

When Ralph Parrott first engaged with the Department of Veterans Affairs around 2017, he met with Ronald Walters, a Senior Executive Service (SES) official serving as the Acting Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs (Leading the National Cemetery Administration). He was later replaced by Randy C. Reeves, Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Memorial Affairs, a political appointee. To underscore the importance of restoring and properly maintaining MINC, Parrott brought compelling visual evidence to the meeting: photographs of Medjez-El-Bab War Cemetery honoring Commonwealth servicemen lost during the North African campaign of WWII in the Tunisian desert that he had personally visited. The cemetery commemorates British soldier who died during the North African campaign during World War II. Despite its isolated location, the site was impeccably maintained, even though approximately 25% of those interred were unidentified service members.



The neglected state of Mare Island Cemetery starkly contrasted with the pristine condition of Medjez-El-Bab War Cemetery in Tunisia

A visual plea for dignity and maintenance that, sadly, failed to move the VA SES official, protection of the MINC was going to take an act of congress.



(From left to right) Thomas Bandzul, General Counsel of Veterans and Military Families for Progress; Retired U.S. Army Colonel Nestor Aliga of Vallejo; Retired U.S. Navy Captain Ralph Parrott of Washington, D.C.; and Robert Wyllie of the Scottish American Military Society in Sacramento, who joined forces to successfully advocate for legislation transferring MINC to the VA's National Cemetery Administration, securing its future preservation.

To highlight the disparity, Parrott presented those images alongside photographs of MINC, a burial ground roughly ten times larger but in a state of neglect. The striking contrast was intended to emphasize the moral and institutional obligation to uphold the dignity of American service members laid to rest on domestic soil.

However, the Under Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Memorial Affairs remained unmoved. The argument also failed to gain traction when Parrott pointed out the immaculate condition of American overseas cemeteries managed by the American Battle Monuments Commission, another agency distinct from the VA. Despite their pristine upkeep and reverent presentation, the example did not sway the decision-makers within Memorial Affairs.

Despite Congressional support and public advocacy, the VA initially resisted accepting the cemetery. Officials cited concerns over precedent, fearing a wave of similar requests from other neglected military burial grounds. It was unclear if this assertion was made as a red herring or if it was simply misinformed. They also argued that Title 38 of the U.S. Code limited their mandate to active national cemeteries, not legacy

sites inherited under BRAC.

Veterans' advocates pushed back, citing Public Law 93-43, which had enabled VA stewardship of closed cemeteries like the Punchbowl in Hawaii. They also documented that Mare Island was a rare case, not a precedent-setting floodgate. The focus shifted to overcoming the institutional inertia within the VA, obtaining enabling legislation, and correcting the extensive maintenance backlog at the MINC.

C. The Advocates Who Refused to Let Go

A dedicated coalition of advocates sustained momentum when federal agencies hesitated, ultimately forcing a long-overdue reckoning with the shameful neglect of the MINC.

- **Colonel Nestor Aliga, USA (Ret.):** Based in Vallejo, Col. Aliga built a broad and diverse coalition that included veterans' service organizations, cultural institutions, and local leaders. He launched a high-impact online petition that garnered over 55,000 signatures, drove media coverage. His leadership bridged community advocacy and policy engagement with remarkable persistence.
- **Thomas Bandzul:** A veterans' rights attorney in Washington, D.C., Bandzul worked side by side with Capt. Parrott to draft legislation, meet with lawmakers, and maintain pressure in the Capitol. His legal insight and political strategy helped keep the issue alive in legislative corridors long after federal agencies had tried to shelve it.
- **Captain Ralph Parrott, USN (Ret.):** The movement began when Capt. Parrott visited Mare Island during a layover in 2017 and was stunned by the cemetery's decay. From that moment forward, he remained a tireless advocate, from calling out city officials to pressing federal leaders and engaging national media.
- **Robert Wyllie:** A Navy veteran and member of the California State Commanders Veterans Council, Wyllie framed Mare Island's abandonment as a moral failure to uphold President Lincoln's promise "to care for him who shall have borne the battle." He helped coordinate outreach, legislative testimony, and public messaging, ensuring the issue never lost its ethical urgency and he worked with California lawmakers to pass a Joint Resolution urging federal action.
- **Veterans of Foreign Wars, Navy League and American Legion:** The national turning point came when the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the Navy League and the American Legion endorsed the MINC transfer. The VFW is the second largest veterans service organization in the United States, and it formally designated the MINC's restoration and federal adoption as one of its Top Ten Legislative Priorities. The Navy League is one of the nation's largest and most influential maritime support organizations, with a broad volunteer network and strong visibility across military, industry, and civic communities. The American Legion is the nation's largest wartime veterans service organization with over 2 million members at 13,000 posts across the globe. These endorsements added powerful institutional support to the grassroots momentum. They gave the effort national visibility, formal weight in congressional advocacy, and undeniable moral authority, compelling lawmakers to treat Mare Island not as a local liability, but as a national responsibility.



- **Journalists:** Rachel Raskin-Zrihen and Thomas Gase of the Vallejo Times Herald took interest in and kept the story in the headlines with many articles. In the words of Captain Ralph Parrott, USN (Ret.) “Rachel became a fierce advocate of the effort” and her articles were instrumental in building momentum behind the effort.

Together, these advocates and institutions made the case that Mare Island was not a municipal burden, it was a broken federal promise.

D. Department of Defense Innovative Readiness Training (IRT): A Turning Point

In October of 2018, Capt. Ralph Parrott arranged a meeting with Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Environment Karnig Ohannessian to advocate for the Navy to acquire and maintain the Mare Island Naval Cemetery (MINC). During that meeting, Ohannessian made it clear that the Navy had no intention of reacquiring the cemetery. However, he acknowledged that the site faced significant and costly capital improvement needs. He also recognized that resolving these deficiencies would go a long way toward defusing resistance within the VA to assume long-term stewardship of the cemetery.

Following that meeting, Ohannessian personally contacted Vallejo Mayor Bob Sampayan and strongly encouraged the city to take advantage of the DoD’s Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) program, a federal initiative that provides no-cost engineering and construction services to communities while offering valuable real-world training for military units. To move forward, the City of Vallejo was required to submit a formal request to the DoD to include the MINC in the IRT program. The DoD IRT program subsequently became the cornerstone of the revitalization effort at MINC, delivering critical infrastructure improvements and site stabilization that laid the foundation for the cemetery’s eventual transfer to the VA. Ohannessian’s outreach and Sampayan’s leadership proved pivotal in launching this initiative and marshalling federal military resources to support a site of deep historical and national significance.



On Veterans Day 2020, U.S. Army Reserve Soldiers of the 801st Engineer Construction Company gathered at the newly constructed flagpole and viewing area at MINC, where they led major restoration efforts. Those efforts included rebuilding fencing, stabilizing the hillside with improved drainage, removing invasive trees, cleaning gravestones, and more—to preserve and honor the historic site. (photo credit Dennis Kelly)

Following Vallejo's successful application, U.S. Army Reserve and National Guard units mobilized under the IRT program beginning in 2019. Their work proved transformational. Over the course of the multi-year effort, IRT personnel completed a wide range of engineering, landscape, and restoration projects, valued in-kind at approximately \$2.5 to \$7 million and consisting of 3,020 training days accomplished by 153 Service Members on the 2.5 acre cemetery. This included mission-critical slope stabilization, erosion mitigation, water drainage improvements, fencing replacement, and headstone restoration.

One of the most urgent priorities addressed was the site's persistent slope instability. The cemetery's sharp topography, rising nearly 89 feet above sea level before sloping toward the Napa River, had long contributed to drainage problems and surface erosion. The 2020 removal of non-native tree species had further destabilized the soil, compounding surface cracking and runoff issues across the upper terrain.

IRT engineers undertook major geotechnical work to correct these problems. They regraded slopes, constructed drainage systems and interceptor ditches, and installed retaining walls to stabilize critical areas. A notable example was the construction of a large concrete-block retaining wall with a stucco parge in Section A, designed both for structural effectiveness and visual compatibility with the cemetery's historic character.

Beyond stabilization, IRT teams executed a suite of vital landscape and structural improvements. These included replacing the deteriorated perimeter fence, restoring circulation paths, upgrading site signage and seating, and performing meticulous restoration on grave markers, realigning headstones, repairing damaged or illegible inscriptions, and reestablishing historic burial plots.

The comprehensive scope of this work, from heavy civil engineering to cultural preservation, elevated the site to meet national standards and directly addressed the concerns that had previously hindered VA acquisition. By restoring structural integrity, enhancing accessibility, and correcting decades of neglect, the IRT initiative helped make the case for federal



Sea Cadets from the Rear Admiral Richard O'Kane Chapter prepare to provide the Color Guard on Veterans Day 2020. The IRT team's heavy equipment and the cemetery can be seen in the background

stewardship, culminating in the VA's decision to assume long-term responsibility for the site.

This transformative effort would not have been possible without the dedication, professionalism, and skill of the Army Reserve and National Guard units that made up the IRT team. As one project leader noted, *"The IRT mission at Mare Island demonstrated the very best of what these teams can accomplish, delivering outstanding results under complex conditions while honoring our veterans with the dignity they deserve."* Their work not only preserved a site of enduring national memory but also provided invaluable real-world training that enhanced military readiness

The Mare Island project stands as a model of civil-military partnership: one that delivered tangible community benefit, honored veterans, and safeguarded an irreplaceable piece of American history.

E. The Struggle for Enabling Legislation

The effort to transfer the Mare Island Naval Cemetery (MINC) to the Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration (VA NCA) was a years-long legislative battle marked by persistence, advocacy, and a powerful appeal to national values.

For decades after the shipyard's closure, MINC, the oldest naval cemetery on the West Coast and final resting place of hundreds of veterans, including Medal of Honor recipients, had fallen into disrepair. Responsibility for its upkeep was unclear, and the City of Vallejo, lacking resources, was unable to provide adequate maintenance. As the condition of the cemetery worsened, the case for transferring responsibility to the VA became more urgent.

a) A Multi-Year Legislative Effort

The drive to bring MINC under federal care gained momentum in the mid-2010s. By 2018, advocates were pursuing a two-track strategy: pressing the White House for an Executive Order to transfer the cemetery to the VA while at the same time advancing bills in Congress. When the Executive Order effort failed to gain traction, the focus narrowed squarely to the legislative solution. Each new session of Congress offered hope, yet also new obstacles. Between 2017 and 2021, bills were repeatedly introduced in both the House and Senate to authorize the transfer of MINC from the City of Vallejo to the VA. The legislative approach was straightforward: file matching standalone bills and push them through both chambers. But despite broad bipartisan support, the effort repeatedly stalled in committee, largely due to persistent opposition from within the VA.

A turning point came in 2020, when advocates shifted course. Instead of relying on fragile standalone legislation, they sought to insert cemetery-transfer language into the must-pass annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). This breakthrough strategy grew out of a Capitol Hill trip by advocates Nestor Aliga and Thomas Bandzul. In early 2022 before a July 22 roundtable with minority veterans, Aliga visited Senator Jerry Moran, the powerful Chair of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, to discuss Senator Feinstein's latest MINC legislation. Moran advised him bluntly: stop chasing a separate bill and focus on embedding MINC language in the NDAA, where it would be far harder to strip out. He also urged Aliga to pressure Senator Dianne Feinstein's office and Congressman Mike Thompson's offices relentlessly, "call them four times a day until it's in." Aliga did exactly that, and Feinstein's staff soon took the lead on drafting an amendment with close support from Thompson's staff.

But hurdles remained:

- **VA Resistance.** To address the VA's objections, the amendment required the Secretary to submit a report to both Veterans' Affairs Committees within 180 days, analyzing the "*feasibility and advisability*" of taking ownership of MINC.
- **Veterans' Service Organizations.** While most veterans' organizations supported the transfer, the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) took a surprising stance. In testimony before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, they claimed "*no position*" but effectively opposed the measure. They warned that VA resources should not be diverted from cemeteries still accepting burials and cited an alarming (and never fully sourced) cost estimate of "*\$15 million or more*" to restore MINC, numbers that rattled lawmakers.
- **House-Senate Conference Objections.** During NDAA negotiations, Representative Dr. Phil Roe, Chair of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, objected that Vallejo needed to "have some skin in the game." Feinstein's staff responded by negotiating compromise language with the city: Vallejo would provide in-kind, non-monetary contributions, labor, equipment, and support, to help improve and maintain the cemetery after any transfer.

At a 2022 Transfer Ceremony Congressman Mike Thompson said of Senator Diane Feinstein "*She was on this like dog on a bone.*" He went on say "*She did not let up. When she gave you her word, it happened.*"

Of MINC Advocate Aliga he went on to say "*Also if wasn't for this former colonel (Aliga), we all wouldn't be here today.*" Continuing while facing Aliga "*Nestor, I can't tell you how glad my colleagues in Washington are glad this is done. I know it was on your dime, but you must have called four times a day.*"

This combination of persistence, strategic reframing, and compromise kept the amendment alive moving the Mare Island Naval Cemetery closer than ever to federal stewardship.

b) Advocacy, Lobbying, and Strategic Influence

Several key figures played pivotal roles in moving the legislation forward. Thomas Bandzul, General Counsel for Veterans and Military Families for Progress and a longtime veterans' advocate, was instrumental. Drawing on decades of experience in veteran-focused policy, Bandzul lobbied lawmakers directly, educating them on the historical significance of MINC and the moral obligation to honor those buried there. In his discussions with Senators and House Members one fact in particular resonated.



The Russian Corvette Norvick lies stranded on the Beach at Drakes Bay, Point Reyes just outside San Francisco Bay (Image: Public Domain)

Six Russian sailors from the Imperial Russian Navy died while heroically fighting a massive fire in San Francisco's Financial District on October 23, 1863. They had been part of the Czarist Pacific Squadron, which was stationed at Mare Island between September 1863 and April 1864 during the American Civil War.

- The sailors had been serving aboard the Russian warship Norvick, which was shipwrecked in Drakes Bay at Point Reyes.
- These men were buried at the Mare Island Naval Cemetery in Vallejo, California.
- Their graves, simply marked "Russian Sailor," are interspersed among those of U.S. servicemembers.

In 1994, over 130 years later, Russian naval officers and diplomats held a memorial service at MINC after learning of the graves' existence. A Russian Orthodox priest led a ceremony, honoring the sailors' sacrifice and symbolizing renewed cooperation between the U.S. and post-Soviet Russia. Following that discovery the Russian Consulate began providing a stipend to the MIHPF to maintain the graves and eventually bought replacement headstones.

This real history provided a powerful advocacy point during the legislative effort to transfer MINC to the VA. Advocates, including Thomas Bandzul, used the respectful and enduring Russian commemoration of its sailors to underscore the moral obligation of the U.S. to care for its own servicemembers' graves, especially when the resting place of Medal of Honor recipients and other veterans at MINC was falling into disrepair.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the second largest Veterans Service Organization, also played a critical role. It was only after Thomas Bandzul convinced Carlos Fuentes, the VFW's Director of National Legislative Service, that the transfer of MINC rose to the forefront of the organization's agenda. At Bandzul's urging, the VFW designated the cemetery's transfer as one of its Top 10 legislative priorities, a move that proved pivotal in bringing national attention to the issue. With that endorsement in place, VFW chapters across the country lobbied their representatives, amplifying grassroots pressure and aligning the cause with broader themes of military honor and national heritage.

c) Final Success

With growing bipartisan support and coordinated advocacy, the language authorizing the transfer of MINC to the VA was successfully included in the FY2021 NDAA. The bill passed both chambers of Congress and despite a presidential veto which Congress overrode, it was signed into law, paving the way for the cemetery to be restored and maintained by the VA in perpetuity; however there remained a couple of final hurdles.

F. Clearing the Final Hurdles to transfer

With the NDAA providing a path to transfer the MINC to the VA, completing the transfer now required that the VA (which had long been in opposition to the transfer) complete a report and advise the congress on the feasibility, costs and advisability of completing the transfer. In addition, the MINC was also encumbered by the State of California and the Tidelands Trust which had to be removed.

1. Continued Opposition and Overcoming the VA Report to Congress

Following the enactment of the NDAA the VA began the process of preparing its report to Congress. The report was submitted on June 23, 2021, as directed by Section 9107 of the Fiscal Year 2021 NDAA, on the feasibility and advisability of transferring MINC from the City of Vallejo to the VA's NCA.

a) The Report

The study examined whether the cemetery could and should be managed under the same standards applied to national cemeteries across the country.

(1) Methodology

The VA conducted a detailed real property feasibility analysis and cost estimate, including:

- Due diligence steps: title services, American Land Title Association (ALTA) survey, appraisal, environmental assessments, historic preservation review, biological and wetlands surveys, and cultural resource studies. These were projected to take 15–24 months at a cost of roughly \$225,000.
- One-time improvement costs: Site remediation, headstone repairs, grading, utilities, irrigation, erosion control, signage, accessibility upgrades, and landscaping. The estimate approached \$7 million.
- Annual recurring maintenance: Ground care, turf upkeep, irrigation, tree trimming, pest control, headstone cleaning, flag raising, and utilities. The projected yearly cost was \$186,000.

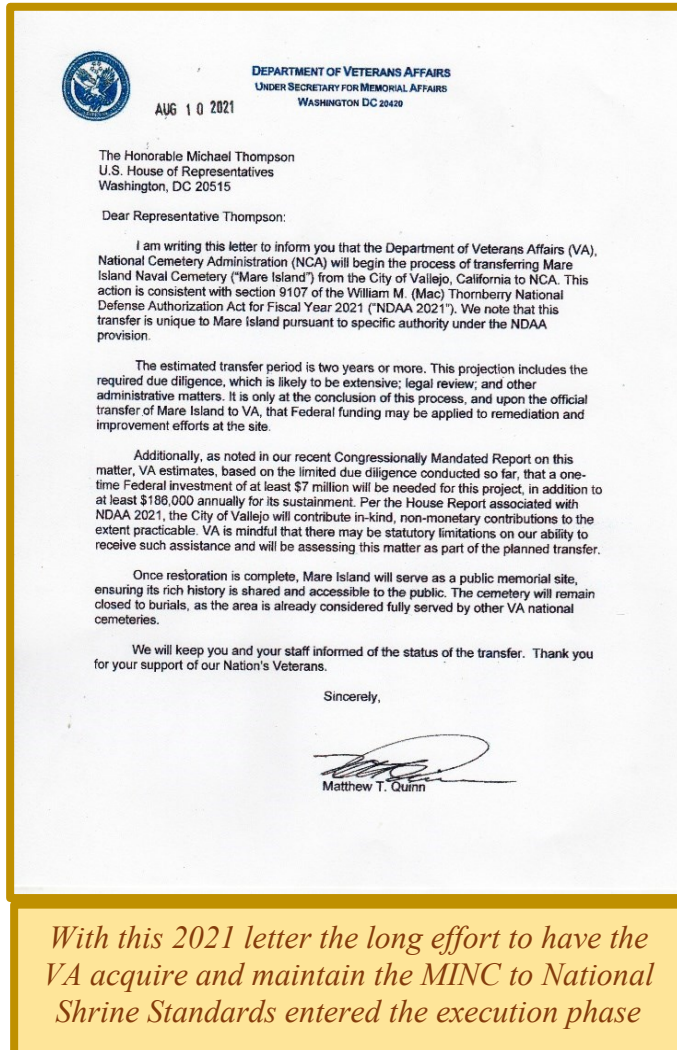
- Alternative support mechanisms: The VA noted the City of Vallejo could pursue in-kind contributions, such as providing water and power, maintaining access roads, mowing, and supporting headstone alignment. A list of ten potential city contributions was drafted (e.g., providing easements, utilities, trash collection, and expanded visitor access).

(2) Key Findings and Recommendations

While the VA determined that a transfer is legally feasible, it concluded that it was not advisable for several reasons:

- Mission Alignment – The NCA’s strategic objective is to ensure burial access for 95% of veterans and their families. MINC has been closed to new burials since 1996, so assuming responsibility would not advance this mission.
- Resource Diversion – Taking on MINC would divert funding and staff away from projects that expand burial access, such as Sacramento Valley National Cemetery and the planned Alameda Point cemetery.
- Precedent Risk – Accepting MINC could encourage other communities with neglected veteran cemeteries to offload responsibility to the VA. The VA noted there are an estimated 18 million veterans buried in cemeteries not under VA, state, or tribal management.
- Local Responsibility – The City of Vallejo has owned the cemetery since 1996 and, in the VA’s view, should continue to maintain it. Examples from other localities, such as Sackets Harbor in New York, show that municipalities can manage veteran cemeteries through public-private partnerships.
- Alternative Support – The VA emphasized that Vallejo has access to programs such as the DoD’s Innovative Readiness Training (IRT), which provided military engineering support at MINC in 2020, and that the VA itself can continue to assist with replacing government-furnished headstones and markers.

(3) Conclusion



VA's final recommendation was to oppose transfer of Mare Island Naval Cemetery to federal control. Instead, the recommendation was that the City of Vallejo should pursue available resources, such as IRT support, public-private partnerships, and VA technical assistance, to ensure the cemetery is adequately preserved in honor of those interred there.

b) Reframing Fiscal Reality: Challenging VA's Cost Barriers to Federal Stewardship

When the VA delivered its long-awaited report to Congress on the feasibility of transferring MINC, advocates wasted no time in dissecting it. The Department's estimate, roughly \$6 million, was a sharp contrast to the \$15 million figure cited by the DAV just a year earlier. But while far lower, the VA's projection was still double what local proponents believed necessary. "*We knew their numbers were inflated,*" one advocate recalled. "*We had walked the grounds, priced the work, and seen firsthand what was needed. Three million was the real figure.*"

To back their case, advocates enlisted the DoD IRT team, which had already carried out significant capital improvements at MINC. With their recent, hands-on experience, the IRT team was uniquely positioned to produce a reliable assessment. Their refined cost projections landed much closer to the advocates' original \$3 million estimate, providing Congress with credible evidence that the VA's assumptions overstated the challenge, although the VA understandably used the higher figure for budget planning purposes.

Yet the VA's resistance was not only financial. The report also argued that accepting responsibility for a historic cemetery closed to new interments did not align with the Department's mission, suggesting it would drain resources from cemeteries still serving veterans' families. Advocates swiftly exposed the inconsistency: just a year earlier, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) had quietly assumed control of the historic Benicia Arsenal Post Cemetery from the Army. Like Mare Island,

Benicia was both historic and closed, and it lay less than seven miles away. “*If they could take Benicia without a word of protest,*” one supporter asked, “*why not Mare Island?*”

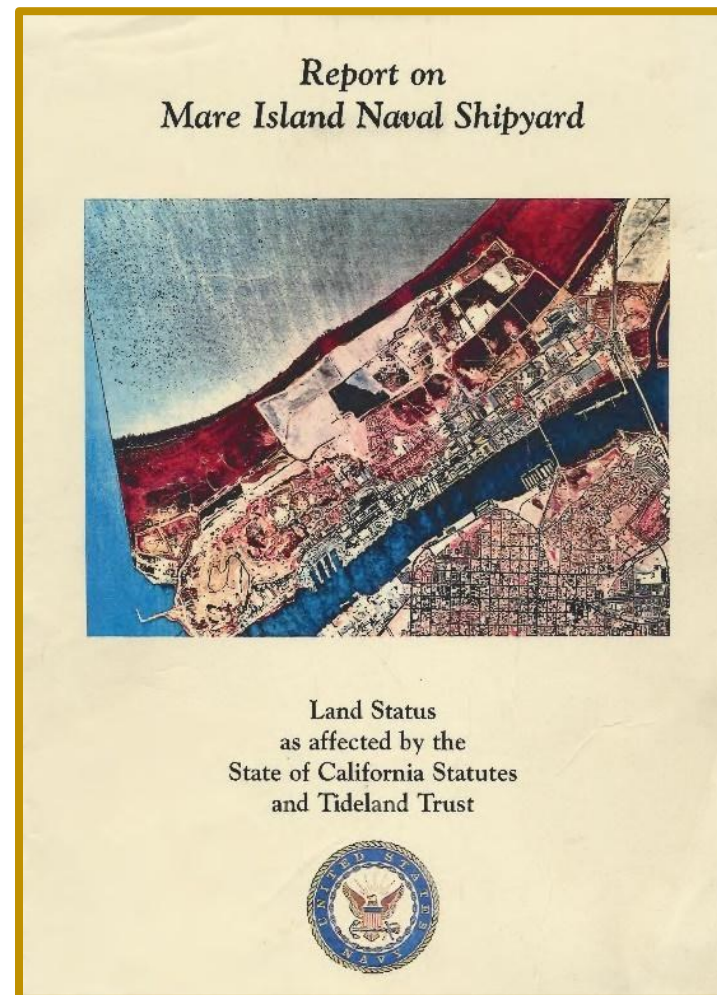
Ensuring these findings received due consideration required direct engagement on Capitol Hill. Advocates worked closely with Congressman Mike Thompson, Congressman John Garamendi, and Senators Dianne Feinstein and Kamala Harris to bring their case before decision-makers. With their help, the IRT estimates and the Benicia precedent were placed squarely on the desks of those with the power to act. The turning point came on August 11, 2021. In a letter to Congressman Thompson, VA Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs Matthew T. Quinn, Major General, U.S. Army (Retired), acknowledged that the Department would move forward with the acquisition of MINC. After years of resistance, the VA had relented. The arguments over costs and mission had finally been addressed. But even with this landmark decision, one significant hurdle remained before the Mare Island Naval Cemetery could at last come under federal stewardship.

2. The Final Hurdle: An Unnecessary Complication

The Navy’s agreement with the City of Vallejo called for transferring Mare Island to the City. But there was a legal complication. Under the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, federal land transfers to non-federal entities, whether states, local governments, or private parties, must be made by quitclaim deed.

A quitclaim deed passes whatever interest the federal government has but provides no warranty of title. If someone later challenges ownership, the quitclaim grantee must defend the title themselves. This matters because any uncertainty, or “cloud,” on title can cause title companies to impose exceptions that must be resolved before the property can be financed.

To address this risk, the Navy ordered a land status review of Mare Island focusing on California statutes and the Tidelands Trust. That review concluded that a prior quiet title action *United States v. O’Donnell*, decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, had already established that most of Mare Island was held in fee simple absolute, the highest form of property ownership.



The California State Lands Commission (SLC) disputed the applicability of this precedent claiming significant reversionary and Public Trust interests based on another case decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, *United States v. Stewart*, using draft maps. Navy attorneys countered treating *Stewart* as a reinforcement of *O'Donnell*, supporting the conclusion that Mare Island proper was owned by the Navy free from state claims. This stance also clashed with the recommendations of an independent commission appointed by the Governor of California, which had concluded that the state's Trust Provisions were a major obstacle to successfully reusing former military sites slated for closure. The City of Vallejo and the State ultimately negotiated a complex and costly Settlement Agreement. This agreement removed the state's claims from certain disputed parcels to allow proposed development, but in exchange, imposed Tidelands Trust restrictions on other parts of Mare Island that historically were never intended to be covered by the trust, as defined in the California Public Resources Code. This included the 2.5-acre MINC, land with no plausible connection to the trust's permissible uses.



Lt. Governor Eleni Kounalakis Address the Audience at the MINC on Veterans Day 2020
Ms. Kounalakis serves as the Chair of the SLC and recognizing the importance of their support in achieving the proposed MINC transfer, Nestor Alegra astutely invited her participation in the program (photo credit Nestor Aliga)

Years later when federal legislation was later passed to transfer the MINC to the Department of Veterans Affairs, the SLC required an elaborate, costly process to strip the Tidelands Trust from the property. This process delayed the MINC transfer for over a year, as detailed in [Appendix C](#).

G. Restoring Honor at the MINC: A Victory for Veterans and Advocates Alike

On November 27, 2023, after years of tireless advocacy and negotiation, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) formally accepted responsibility for the Mare Island Naval Cemetery (MINC). This hard-fought milestone marked the culmination of a persistent campaign to right historic wrongs and ensure that over 950 veterans, military spouses, children, and even Medal of Honor recipients could finally rest in dignity.

Advocates had to overcome formidable obstacles. They succeeded in untangling the inappropriate application of the Tidelands Trust, which had wrongly complicated MINC's legal status. They pushed through deep institutional resistance within the VA. And they spearheaded a major restoration effort using the DoD's Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) program, an unprecedented and creative approach that brought military engineering resources to the task.

A critical turning point came in 2021 when the Fiscal Year 2021 NDAA, passed over a presidential veto, mandated the transfer, restoration, and perpetual maintenance of the cemetery by the VA. After years of legislative delays and bureaucratic stonewalling, Congress finally acted, delivering on a long-ignored promise.

This federal action was reinforced by a powerful show of support at the state level. In 2023, the California Legislature unanimously passed Senate Joint Resolution 26, introduced by Senator Bill Dodd and co-sponsored by Assemblyman Tim Grayson. The resolution urged the federal government to fulfill its obligation to preserve and protect the Mare Island Naval Cemetery. Its unanimous passage sent a strong message that this was not just a local or partisan issue, it had broad-based community and bipartisan legislative backing. The resolution amplified the moral imperative and reinforced the legitimacy of the federal action that followed.

This achievement was made possible through the united efforts of many, including Congressmen Mike Thompson and John Garamendi, the late Senator Dianne Feinstein, the 801st Engineer Company, Vallejo Mayor Robert McConnell, former Mayor Bob Sampayan, and a coalition of veteran service organizations and civic groups. Key advocates such as Thomas Bandzul, General Counsel for Veterans and Military Families for Progress; retired U.S. Army Colonel Nestor Aliga of Vallejo; retired U.S. Navy Captain Ralph Parrot of Washington, D.C.; and Robert Wyllie of the Scottish American Military Society played critical roles in navigating the legal, political, and logistical challenges.

Together with national organizations like the American Legion, Wounded Warrior Project, Vietnam Veterans of America, Minority Veterans of America, Military Women's Coalition, and many others, they answered the call of duty, honor, and country.

The Mare Island Naval Cemetery is administered by the Sacramento Valley National Cemetery and maintained to NCA standards. Though closed to new burials, MINC will be preserved as a national shrine, ensuring perpetual care and remembrance.



Left to right, Congressmen John Garamendi, and Mike Thompson, 801st Engineer Company Commander Captain Brandon Sawyer, Mayor Robert McConnell, Senator Feinstein Field Representative Joe Voelker, Nestor Aliga, and Vallejo Police Department, Chaplain Mike Brown, and Veterans Administration Executive Director Ms. Lisa Pozzebon (not shown) all spoke at a preliminary transfer ceremony on May 14, 2022. (photo credit Nestor Aliga)

This was more than a bureaucratic win; it was a moral triumph. It demonstrated that when citizens unite for just cause, policy can be realigned with principle.

Restoration continues, including:

- Headstone stabilization
- Stormwater management
- Interpretive signage
- Public access including ADA compliance and parking
- Lighting and security improvements
- Digital access to burial records

But the core achievement is already secure: MINC is no longer forgotten. It stands once again as a solemn place of national remembrance, to be honored, restored, and preserved for generations to come.



X. Epilogue

The formal transfer of the MINC to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in November 2023 marked the culmination of a long, determined campaign, but not the end of the mission. It was the conclusion of one chapter and the beginning of another: a transition from advocacy to restoration, from rescue to remembrance.

With federal stewardship secured, attention turned to healing what years of neglect have eroded, and to fulfilling the solemn promise of transforming this sacred site into a national shrine that reflects the dignity and sacrifice of those interred there.

The Department of Veterans Affairs, through the NCA and under the supervision of the Sacramento Valley National Cemetery, has begun the meticulous work of stabilizing the site. These initial efforts, spearheaded by an IRT, focus on urgent repairs and planning for long-term improvements. It is already clear that despite earlier organizational resistance from within the VA, the NCA is fully committed to bringing the MINC up to National Shrine Standards and much remains to be done.

Decades of deferred maintenance have left behind a legacy of physical deterioration: sunken graves, damaged or missing headstones, corroded fencing, failing drainage, overgrown trees, and incomplete or fragmented burial records. In addition, many of the site's paths, monuments, and landscape features fall short of accessibility and interpretive standards set by the NCA.

Restoring the site to National Shrine Standards is not simply a matter of construction, it is a matter of care, reverence, and historical stewardship. It requires not only engineering and horticultural expertise, but also sustained financial commitment, cultural sensitivity, and a deep understanding of the site's heritage.



The MINC as it appeared in August 2025
While extensive drainage and stabilization improvements have been completed much more work remains to bring the MINC to National Shrine standards. (image credit Dennis Kelly).

The full restoration scope includes:

- Re-leveling and preserving historic headstones
- Repairing and reinforcing failing perimeter fencing
- Installing new signage and interpretive markers
- Implementing stormwater management and erosion controls
- Constructing ADA-compliant walkways and accessible entry points
- Digitizing burial data and linking it with the NCA's grave locator system
- Addressing root intrusion and tree hazards affecting gravesites
- Establishing a long-term maintenance and preservation plan

When federal systems stalled, citizens stepped forward—bringing national attention and restoration to Mare Island Naval Cemetery. The following were Key Players in this effort

Colonel Nestor Aliga, USA (Ret.), a veteran and longtime advocate for military recognition - Built bridges across communities, organized inclusive memorial events, and advanced public recognition of overlooked service members.

“We fight for the legacy of all who served.”

Thomas Bandzul, Legislative Advocate - Drafted key legislation (H.R. 5588/S. 2881), engaged hundreds of congressional staffers, and publicly challenged VA testimony.

“If we won’t honor graves here, what does that say about our values?”

Capt. Ralph Parrott, USN (Ret.) - Discovered the cemetery’s decay in 2017 and launched the first formal appeals. Coordinated veteran outreach and petitioned federal officials, calling the site “a disgrace.”

“It’s going to take having enough people embarrassed about it.”

Robert Wyllie, a Navy Veteran, active in Calif. veteran organizations and issues - Wrote compelling articles linking Mare Island’s neglect to Lincoln’s promise. Raised awareness and underscored national responsibility.

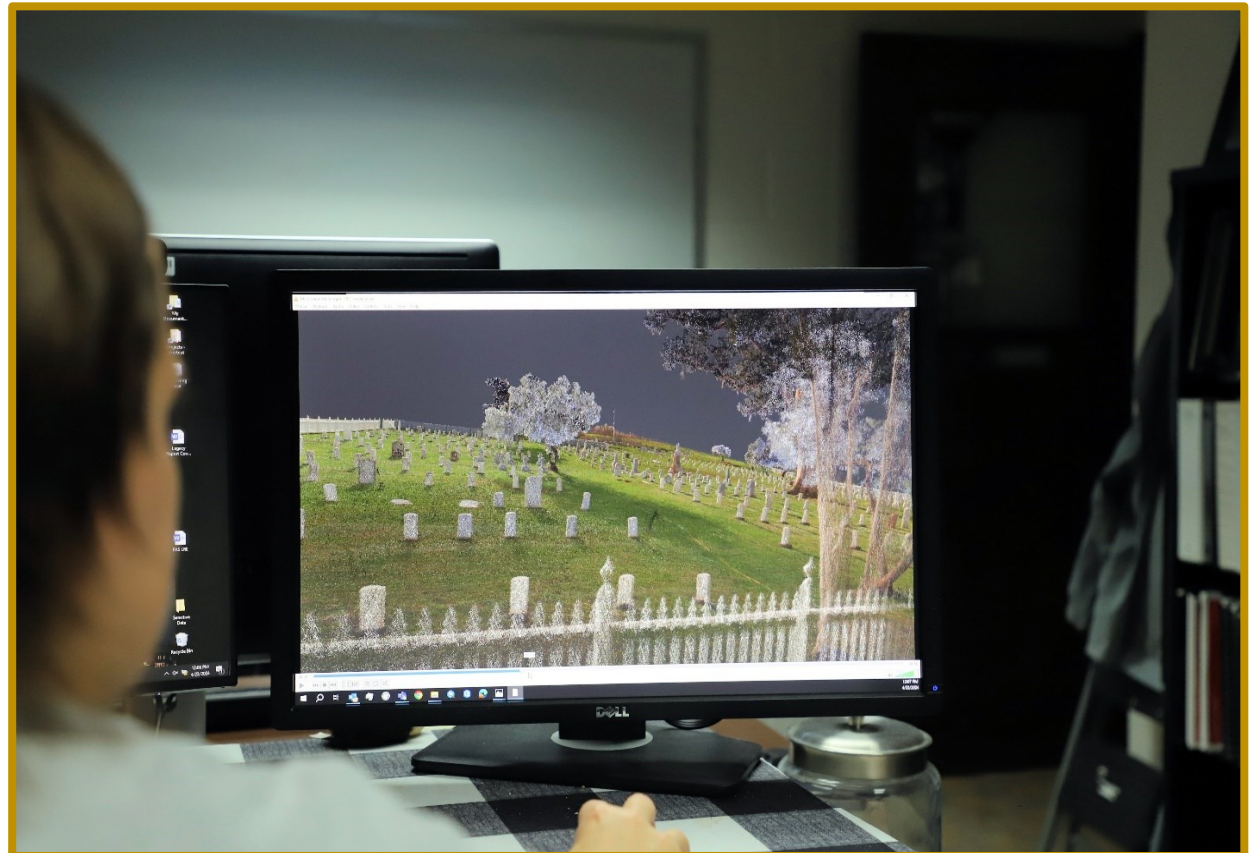
“We recover the fallen overseas—why not care for those already home?”

Together, they transformed a forgotten hillside into hallowed ground—and reignited a promise to honor service with dignity.

In time, visitors will walk MINC's paths and see not only stone and inscription but sacrifice and legacy. They will find the names of pioneers, patriots, and sailors who served in distant wars. They will learn of the shipyard that built submarines and broke barriers. They will see the flag flying, not out of habit, but out of hard-won remembrance.

The MINC, once stateless and forgotten, now stands on the threshold of renewal. Its current condition reflects decades of abandonment, but its future is guided by national standards, professional stewardship, and community dedication. Abraham Lincoln once called on the nation *"to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan."* That promise was broken at Mare Island, for too long. But it has now been mended, through the persistence of those who refused to look away.

At the time of this writing the NCA design work is underway and upgrading the MINC to National Shrine Standards is scheduled to complete by the end of 2027.



Behind the Scenes: Preparing Mare Island Naval Cemetery for National Shrine Standards

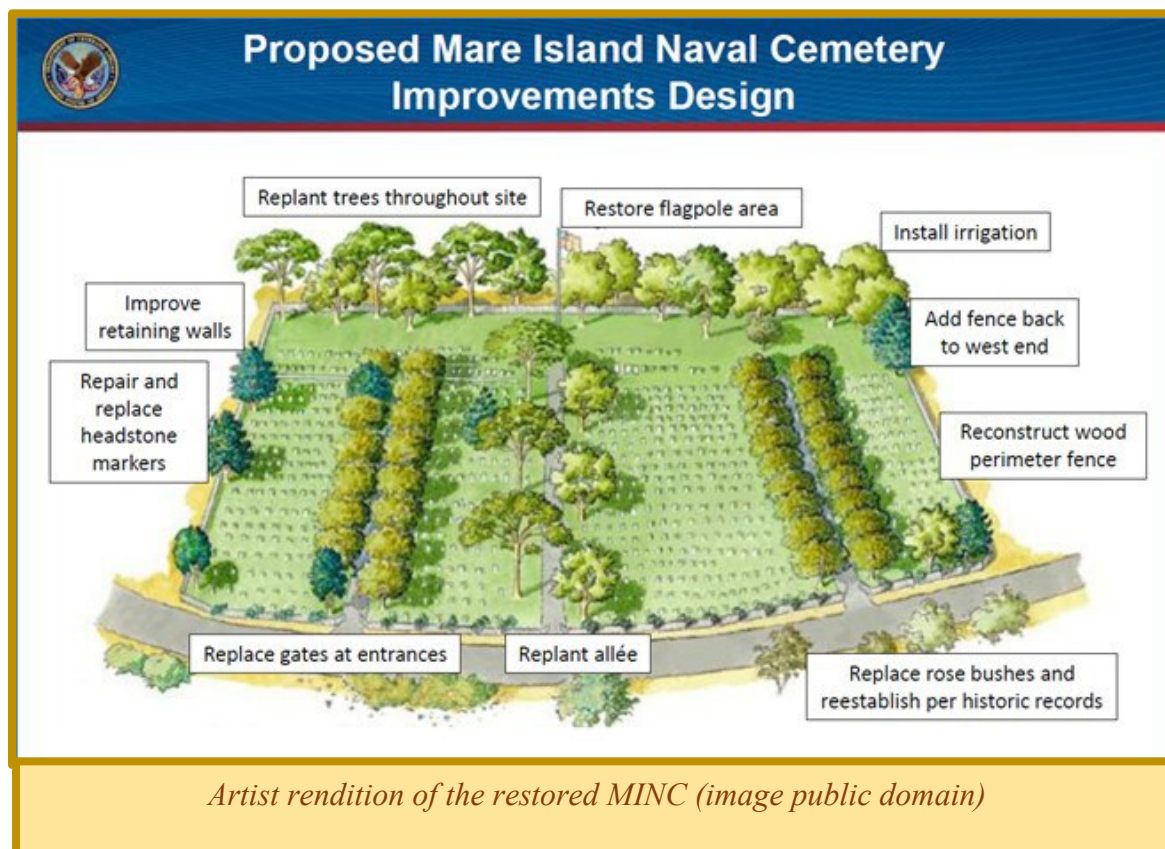
The Cultural Resources Team at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Engineer Research and Development Center is hard at work planning the cemetery's transformation. Their efforts include documenting the site's history, conducting a historic landscape inventory, completing geotechnical surveys, developing a cultural landscape management plan, and producing a detailed headstone inventory with high-definition scans. (image public domain)

One Final Note

In the United States, **fewer than 1% of Americans** will ever serve in our nation's military. Each of those men and women swears a solemn oath to:

- Support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic
- Bear true faith and allegiance to the same
- Obey the lawful orders of the President and appointed officers (enlisted)
- Freely accept the duties of office and faithfully discharge them without reservation (officers)
- And conclude with the pledge: "So help me God."

This oath traces its roots to the Civil War, as does our nation's enduring commitment to honor that service by providing burial with military funeral honors in places of dignity, respect, and perpetual care. This is more than a promise made by a federal agency. It is a public pledge to honor those willing to risk their lives for the enduring ideal of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.



As the MINC is brought to National Shrine Standards, it will not only restore the honor these long-ago interred veterans deserve, but also **sends a powerful message to future generations**, especially to that small percentage who may one day consider taking the same oath of service.



Lincoln's second inaugural address in 1865 where he expressed his commitment to those who have borne the battle. 42 days later Lincoln was gunned down by an assassin. (image public domain)

Appendix A: Milestones in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery Transfer, Early California and Naval Foundations (1848–1854)

➤ 1848–1850: California’s Rapid Growth

- January 24, 1848: James W. Marshall discovers gold at Sutter’s Mill, sparking a massive migration and economic boom.
- February 2, 1848: The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends the Mexican-American War, ceding California to the United States.
- September 9, 1850: California becomes the 31st state under the Compromise of 1850, prompting federal infrastructure investments.

➤ 1852: Establishing Mare Island

- January 15, 1852: President Millard Fillmore and Navy Secretary William A. Graham order a survey to select a Pacific naval shipyard site.
- March 1852: Commodore John D. Sloat recommends Mare Island for its strategic location and deepwater port.
- July 1, 1852: The federal government purchases Mare Island for \$83,491.

➤ 1854: Founding the Shipyard

- September 16, 1854: Commander David Glasgow Farragut arrives to establish the Mare Island Naval Shipyard as the first U.S. naval base on the Pacific Coast, initiating construction of dry docks and facilities. His leadership shapes its 142-year legacy of shipbuilding and naval service.

➤ Mare Island Naval Cemetery Beginnings (1856–1921)

- 1856: First Burial
 - February 12, 1856: Sailor George Dowd of the USS Massachusetts is buried at Mare Island Naval Cemetery (MINC), with a funeral led by Rev. Mr. Hunt of San Francisco, marking it as the resting place for naval personnel and their families.
- 1921: MINC Closure
 - November 1, 1921: The MINC closes to new burials after nearly 1,000 interments over 65 years. Plans to relocate remains for a powder magazine are abandoned due to logistical challenges and family objections, preserving the site as inactive.

Appendix A: Milestones in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery Transfer, Early California and Naval Foundations (1848–1854)

➤ Enactment of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (1970)

- January 1, 1970: President Richard Nixon signs the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) into law, establishing a national policy for environmental protection and requiring federal agencies to assess the environmental impacts of major actions before decisions are made.
- In the context of Mare Island, NEPA should have guided decisions related to base closure, land transfers, and MINC stewardship, but its waiver or deferral under BRAC led to uninformed and disconnected outcomes.

➤ National Recognition and Later Burial (1975–1983)

- 1975: Historic Designation
 - The MINC is named a National Historic Landmark (NHL) within the Mare Island Naval Ammunition Depot Historic District and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its status as the oldest naval cemetery on the West Coast underscores its historical significance, mandating federal preservation standards. Despite this, neglect follows its 2001 transfer to the City of Vallejo, highlighting a gap between legal protection and actual care.
- 1983: Final Burial
 - December 7, 1983: Eleanor Phelps Glassford Gibson, daughter of Rear Admiral William Glassford, is buried by special arrangement in Section A, Row 02, Plot 434. This exception honors her family’s naval legacy, marking the last known interment.

➤ Enactment of the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act (BRAC) and NEPA Deferral (1990)

- November 5, 1990: Congress enacts the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act (BRAC) as part of Public Law 101-510, creating a structured process for closing and realigning military installations.
- While BRAC required NEPA compliance during property disposal, it deferred environmental review during the initial decision-making phase, effectively waiving NEPA’s core purpose of informed analysis prior to federal action.
- In the case of Mare Island, the NEPA deferral contributed to the neglect of the MINC, and the absence of realistic perpetual care provisions during the BRAC disposal process.

Appendix A: Milestones in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery Transfer, Early California and Naval Foundations (1848–1854)

➤ Base Closure and Property Transfer (1993–2005)

- 1993: BRAC Process
 - March–September 1993: The Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission recommends closing Mare Island Naval Shipyard. President Bill Clinton approves, and Congress does not override, finalizing the closure.

➤ 1994–1996: Closure and Agreements

- April 11, 1994: The Federal Real Property screening begins; the VA declines to claim the inactive MINC.
- April 1, 1996: The shipyard officially closes after 142 years.
- July 1, 1996: The Navy signs a Cooperative Agreement with Vallejo, providing \$30 million over five years for maintenance of the entire base.
- August 12, 1997: A Historic Programmatic Agreement mandates MINC maintenance under federal standards until transferred.

➤ 2002–2005: Transfer to Vallejo

- 2001: The MINC is transferred to Vallejo under an Economic Development Conveyance Agreement, with requirements for perpetual care.
- December 2005: Vallejo adopts Historic Project Guidelines, requiring the city to maintain the MINC in “good repair.”

➤ International Attention and Advocacy (2011–2018)

- 2010 MIHPF and City of Vallejo initiate effort to have the MINC added to the NPS system.
- 2011: Russian Involvement
 - 2011: In a striking contrast to U.S. neglect, the Russian Consulate invests \$20,000 to replace weathered headstones for six Russian sailors buried in 1863 after heroically fighting a San Francisco fire. Their ongoing stipends to the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation for grave maintenance highlight a century-long commitment to honoring their fallen, shaming the U.S. abandonment of its own naval heroes’ resting place. This poignant dichotomy galvanizes federal legislators, amplifying advocacy for restoring MINC and underscoring its global historical significance

Appendix A: Milestones in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery Transfer, Early California and Naval Foundations (1848–1854)

- 2015 Following the failure of the MIHPF and City of Vallejo effort to have the MINC added to the NPS system in 2010, they reduce the proposed footprint of the proposed addition to the NPS system. As in 2010, the NPS is not supportive of the addition to the NPS system and the effort fails.
- 2017–2018: Grassroots and Legislative Push
 - February 2017: Capt. Ralph Parrott documents the MINC’s neglect, sparking advocacy.
 - February 2018: Marine veteran Nestor Aliga’s petition gains 56,000 signatures, drawing national attention.
 - 2018: Local veterans’ groups, including the Vallejo Veterans Memorial Committee and AMVETS Post 112, join Aliga’s campaign, organizing community cleanups of the MINC and lobbying legislators, sustaining momentum for federal intervention.
 - April–May 2018: Rep. Mike Thompson and Senators Dianne Feinstein and Kamala Harris introduce H.R. 5588 and S. 2881, urging VA stewardship. Both bills die in committee, but Senator Bill Dodd’s California State Senate Joint Resolution 26 Cosponsored by Assemblyman Tim Grayson passes unanimously, reinforcing the call for federal action.

➤ Restoration and Legislative Progress (2019–2021)

- Summer 2019: The DoD’s Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) program, championed by Deputy Assistant Secretary Karnig Ohannessian, launches critical restoration efforts, tackling erosion and installing vital drainage systems.
 - 2019–2020: Army Reserve engineers stabilize the MINC, repairing decades of neglect and ensuring structural integrity.
 - 2021: IRT completes its transformative work, turning a dilapidated site into one ready for federal stewardship. These improvements prove pivotal, dismantling the VA’s key objections to acquiring the MINC by demonstrating its viability for long-term care.
- 2019–2020: Legislative Efforts
 - January 2019: Thompson and Feinstein reintroduce H.R. 578 and S. 127, which fail to advance.
 - February–June 2020: H.R. 6039 and S. 2983 refine prior bills, requiring a VA feasibility study. Supported by veterans’ organizations, the bills didn’t pass.

Appendix A: Milestones in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery Transfer, Early California and Naval Foundations (1848–1854)

- 2020: Acting Chair Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Jerry Moran, advises MINC advocates (Nestor Aliga (Nestor flew from Vallejo to Washington DC seven times to lobby for the MINC) and Thomas Bandzul) to focus their efforts on adding the MINC language to the NDAA (H.R. 6395) rather than pursuing separate stand-alone legislation. By doing this the language would be buried in a must pass Bill. Senator Moran also advised Nestor to call Senator Feinstein's staff four times per day until the language was added to the NDAA which he did. Colonel Nestor Aliga, USA (Ret.): built a broad and diverse coalition that included veterans' service organizations, cultural institutions, and local leaders. He launched a high-impact online petition that garnered over 55,000 signatures, drove media coverage. His leadership bridged community advocacy and policy engagement with remarkable persistence.
- Senator Feinstein's staff takes the lead to add the MINC provisions during conference between the House and the Senate on the NDAA.
- Summer 2020 When the proposed MINC language was discussed during the House Senate Conference markup of the NDAA congressman Dr. Phil Roe, Chair of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, objected stating that Vallejo must have some skin in the game.
- Fall 2020 Feinstein's staff works with Vallejo to develop compromise language addressing Congressman Roe's concerns. The NDAA was modified to state

“the City of Vallejo should provide in-kind non-monetary contributions for the improvement and maintenance of Mare Island Naval Cemetery, including labor and equipment, to the extent practicable, to the Department of Veterans Affairs, following any transfer of the cemetery to the Department.”

- December 2020: the transfer provisions to the VA including the Vallejo support language for the MINC are included in the FY2021 NDAA.
- December 2020–January 2021: Despite a presidential veto, Congress overrides, authorizing the MINC transfer subject to a feasibility study to be conducted by the VA confirming the feasibility and advisability of the transfer. Became Law January 1, 2021

➤ Final Transfer and Federal Stewardship (2021–2023)

- 2021: VA Resistance

Appendix A: Milestones in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery Transfer, Early California and Naval Foundations (1848–1854)

- June 23, 2021: The VA complete feasibility study required by the 2021 NDAA and recommends against the transfer, citing costs and precedent concerns. Advocates, including Thomas Bandzul, refute this, citing legal precedents like Public Law 93-43.
- Summer 2021: Veterans’ advocates, including the non-profits VFW and The Mission Continues, counter the VA’s report with public campaigns and detailed cost analyses, arguing that MINC’s historical status and IRT improvements justify federal stewardship, swaying key congressional committees.
- Following the 2020 Census the California Citizens Redistricting Commission formally certified and submitted the final redistricting maps to the California Secretary of State. The result of this change was that Congressman Mike Thompson would end a decade of representing Vallejo and Mare Island to be replaced by Congressman John Garamendi beginning January 3, 2023. While Congressman Thompson and Garamendi worked together on the cemetery transfer, this gave Thompson additional motivation to get the transfer executed and to address VA resistance to the transfer.
- August 10, 2021: VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Mathew T. Quinn, writes Congressman Thompson advising him that the VA will begin the process of transferring the MINC.
- 2022–2023: Resolving Legal Hurdles
 - The City of Vallejo, State Lands Commission, and VA engage in coordinated negotiations to resolve jurisdictional and environmental obligations. This includes:
 - Amending the State Lands Settlement Agreement to release the cemetery from Public Trust restrictions.
 - Executing patents and deeds to formally transfer property rights among the City, the State, and the VA.
 - May 23, 2023: By unanimous vote, the City Council approves a comprehensive resolution authorizing:
 - The Trust Termination Patent to release the cemetery from the State Lands Commission’s oversight.
 - A Quitclaim Deed transferring ownership of the cemetery parcel to the VA.
 - A Deed of Easement granting the VA access to City-owned land adjacent to the cemetery for use as parking and restrooms.
 - Authority to enter into agreements with the U.S. Navy and the NCA to provide utility access and storm drainage maintenance.

Appendix A: Milestones in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery Transfer, Early California and Naval Foundations (1848–1854)

- October 2023: Governor Gavin Newsom signs documents releasing the MINC from the arcane Public Trust restrictions and State claim on title.

➤ November 27, 2023: Federal Stewardship

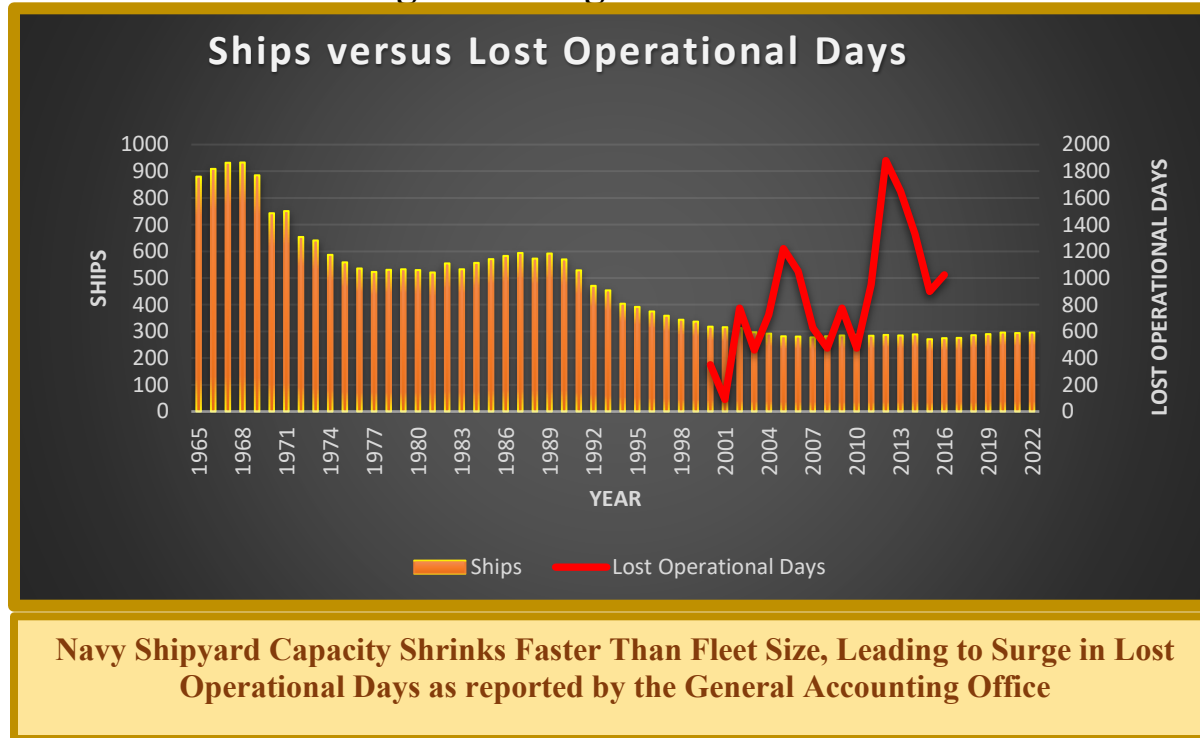
- The MOA is executed, contemporaneous with transferring the MINC to the VA's National Cemetery Administration. Managed by Sacramento Valley National Cemetery, it is maintained as a national shrine under NCA standards, ensuring perpetual care while remaining closed to new burials.

➤ 2024: Dedication Ceremony

- Spring 2024: A dedication ceremony, attended by Rep. Mike Thompson, VA officials, and local veterans, celebrates the MINC's transfer to federal care. The event honors the nearly 1,000 buried naval personnel and families, marking a new era of dignity and preservation for this historic site.

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

The BRAC Reckoning: Planning for Failure



In 1993, the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission set in motion one of the most consequential shifts in U.S. naval infrastructure since World War II. Its purpose was clear: reduce excess capacity, eliminate redundancy, and reshape military installations for a post-Cold War world. But beneath the surface of this bureaucratic restructuring lay a series of miscalculations, decisions that would ripple through the Navy's operational readiness for decades and almost cast a historic naval cemetery into the dustbin of history.

BRAC was conceived as a politically insulated, data-driven process. Yet in practice, it frequently prioritized expediency over nuance. It operated under exemptions that weakened critical oversight, most notably, the waiver of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). This removed a key safeguard that would have required in-depth assessment of cultural, environmental, and historical impacts.

The structure of BRAC further insulated it from meaningful challenge. Once the DoD submitted its closure recommendations, the BRAC Commission had limited authority to second-guess the policy rationale. Unless a proposal clearly deviated from objective criteria or contained factual errors, the Commission could not override it. As a result, many closures proceeded with minimal scrutiny, and long-term consequences by creating an increasingly overstrained Navy and its supporting industrial infrastructure. One symptom of this strain is illustrated in the chart showing the growing number of lost operational days for U.S. Battle Force ships, a trend that has been climbing upward for years. Not only do these lost days keep vital assets unavailable for national defense, they also carry measurable costs: for instance, a single aircraft carrier strike group can cost as much as \$6.5–8 million per day to operate, while destroyers, frigates, and littoral combat ships typically run \$137,000–\$222,000 per day. Each day lost compounds both the financial burden of inactive ships and crews sitting idle awaiting maintenance not to mention the gap created in fleet readiness.

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

Anchors Under Threat: The Navy's Fight to Preserve Public Shipyards Ahead of the 1990s BRAC Rounds

By the late 1980s, the U.S. Navy faced a sobering reality: the Cold War was drawing to a close, defense budgets were shrinking, and the once-vast battle force fleet was headed for dramatic downsizing. With fewer ships projected, the infrastructure that supported them, particularly the public shipyards, was suddenly in jeopardy.

Inside the Navy, commands responsible for shipyard readiness mobilized to defend this vital capacity. They argued that losing public yards meant losing the nation's ability to sustain a nuclear fleet. At the same time, others in Washington worked to streamline closures through a new mechanism: the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process, designed to declare bases "excess" and shutter them with minimal congressional interference.

1) Collapse of the Private Sector and the Retreat of Subsidies

The Navy's fight to protect public yards was complicated by the simultaneous erosion of private capacity. For decades, US private shipyards enjoyed what was called a Construction Differential Subsidy (CDS) which had underwritten commercial shipbuilding. Its termination in 1981 was catastrophic: commercial orders collapsed, yards like Todd went bankrupt, and tens of thousands of jobs disappeared. Todd Shipyards was one of the largest private shipbuilding and repair companies in the U.S. through much of the 20th century, with multiple facilities. Its collapse symbolized the implosion of America's commercial shipbuilding base after subsidies ended, leaving the Navy increasingly dependent on its eight public shipyards. By the late 1980s, the private ship repair industry was hollowed out, dependent almost entirely on Navy contracts, and unable to compete with foreign shipbuilders thriving under their governments' industrial policies.

With private yards diminished, the Navy concluded it could not risk losing public capacity as well.

2) The 70/30 Workload Split as a Lifeline

To balance readiness with industrial survival, the Navy and Congress leaned on a formula: roughly 70% of repair and overhaul work for public yards, 30% for private yards. The idea was to keep the nuclear-sensitive work in government hands while still feeding enough contracts to preserve private-sector viability.

But even in 1987, this balance was faltering. Vice Admiral William Rowden testified before Congress that the Navy needed 56,000 workers for its "core logistics capability," yet public yards employed nearly 79,000, evidence of excess capacity and inefficiency. He acknowledged the paradox:

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

“We are faced with the challenge of stabilizing the naval shipyard workforce while at the same time supporting the private sector with work, two objectives which are not always compatible.”

Competition experiments were tried, pitting public against private bids, but results were inconclusive. The fragility of both systems was becoming harder to hide.

3) Strategic Realignment After the Cold War

As the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the strategic environment that had justified a 600-ship Navy evaporated almost overnight. No peer competitor remained to threaten global sea lanes or challenge U.S. control of the seas. Instead, Washington began redefining the Navy’s role:

- **From superpower rivalry to regional crises.** The Navy became a forward-deployed presence for stability operations, humanitarian missions, and deterrence of regional aggressors.
- **Rise of counter-terrorism and global policing.** Naval forces shifted toward missions like maritime interception, littoral warfare, and power projection in small conflicts rather than preparation for a global nuclear war.
- **Fleet contraction.** Without the Soviet threat, defense planners argued that the Navy could be safely cut nearly in half. The “peace dividend” was premised on a 300–350 ship fleet rather than 550–600.

This transformation carried devastating implications for the industrial base. A fleet reduced by half required correspondingly fewer overhauls, fewer nuclear refuelings, and fewer routine availabilities. Even if some presence missions persisted, the shipyard workload, public and private, was destined to fall dramatically. The infrastructure that had sustained Cold War operations now appeared to Congress and the Pentagon as redundant, expensive, and ripe for elimination.

4) Clash Within the Navy and DoD

The path toward downsizing was anything but smooth. Within the Navy and the Pentagon, bitter disputes broke out over how to shed capacity without crippling long-term readiness.

- **VADM Malley (NAVSEA 07)** argued in 1991–1993 that the Navy should retain all eight public shipyards for mobilization, even if near-term workload was insufficient. He warned that budget-driven cuts were outpacing what regulations and workforce reductions could absorb, creating spiraling financial losses in the yards.
- **RADM David Oliver (OSD/Acquisition)** sharply rebuked Malley, accusing his command of “*short term financial fixes*” and Oliver openly advocated for mass layoffs and further yard closures, which he dismissed as “*excess capacity*”.

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

- This exchange highlighted a fundamental divide: one side sought to mothball or preserve infrastructure for future contingencies, while the other saw rapid closures as the only viable way to match a halved fleet with slashed budgets.

The clash was far more than bureaucratic infighting; it was a struggle over the very future of American sea power. On one side stood those who saw naval infrastructure as the Navy's 'seed corn', the indispensable foundation of artisans, docks, and shipyards without which no fleet could be sustained or rebuilt. On the other were those willing to burn through that inheritance in the name of immediate budget savings, trading long-term strength for short-term relief. The outcome would determine not just how many ships the Navy could field in the moment, but whether it would retain the means to regenerate when the nation next called upon it.

5) BRAC and the Battle for Survival

The first three BRAC rounds (1991, 1993, 1995) forced the Navy into a defensive fight. Its arguments echoed Rowden's warnings:

1. **Public yards were indispensable for nuclear work.** Carrier refuelings and submarine overhauls could not be reliably outsourced.
2. **Skilled workers were irreplaceable.** Welders, nuclear machinists, and artisans could not simply be rehired once dismissed.
3. **The 70/30 policy required both systems.** Eliminating public yards would crush already fragile private yards, while closing private yards would further hollow out competition.

Despite these pleas, closures came: Philadelphia (1991), Charleston and Mare Island (1993), and Long Beach (1995). Only Norfolk, Puget Sound, Portsmouth, and Pearl Harbor shipyards survived.

6) Legacy and Lessons

The dual blow of private-sector collapse and BRAC closures left the U.S. with a dangerously thinned repair base. The 70/30 split, once envisioned as balanced, became impossible to maintain. Public yards routinely exceeded 70% of the work because private yards lacked the labor and capital to accomplish the work. Private firms shifted toward new construction niches, while repair resilience steadily declined.

History has shown the danger of such losses:

- After World War I, U.S. naval yard closures left the fleet unready for World War II.
- Britain's dockyard retrenchment in the 1960s–70s left the Royal Navy overstretched in the Falklands.
- Russia's post-Soviet collapse gutted its shipyard workforce, crippling its ability to rebuild later.

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

The pattern is clear: fleets can be reconstituted with money, but shipyards and skilled workers take decades to replace. Cutting both ships and shipyards is like consuming the seed corn: once it is gone, recovery becomes nearly impossible.

Shifting Priorities: The Transition from Operational Expertise to Budgetary Control

In the early 1990s, the U.S. Navy was floundering, not from enemy fire, but from internal scandal and leadership instability. The Tailhook affair had torn through the ranks, eroding trust and triggering a carousel of acting officials at the Secretariat. Yet amid this organizational tumult, civilian leadership doubled down on one of the most aggressive infrastructure reductions in history: the 1993 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) round. The Navy had been severely criticized for not cutting enough infrastructure in the 1991 BRAC round even though the Navy had designated a major public shipyard for closure. Despite pressure from private shipyards more public yards were not closed in part due to the Navy commands responsible for that infrastructure arguing that it would be needed for mobilization, surge and redundancy in the future.

In 1993 the solution to countering the arguments of the NAVSEA command responsible for execution of shipbuilding and repair was to ignore them. The 1993 effort was spearheaded by Charley Nemfakos, a blunt and commanding figure whose reputation for arrogance was as pronounced as his budgetary prowess. Like then-Secretary of the Navy Sean O’Keefe, Nemfakos hailed not from the decks or the yards, but from the Pentagon’s fiscal watchtower. These were not operational savants, battle-tested admirals, or logistics visionaries, they were cash flow jockeys. Aggressive and powerful budgeteers. O’Keefe’s nickname, “The Grim Reaper,” widely echoed in the press during his later tenure at NASA, reflected a career built on spreadsheets rather

The Budgeteer at the Helm Sean O’Keefe, Secretary of the Navy (1992–1993)

Sean O’Keefe didn’t rise through the ranks of naval command—he ascended through the corridors of Washington’s budgetary machinery. With a degree in history, a master’s in public administration and years of experience on the Senate Appropriations Committee, O’Keefe came to the Pentagon not with a background in shipyard operations or fleet logistics, but in fiscal discipline and institutional reform.

As Comptroller of the Department of Defense, he was known for his exacting oversight and analytical rigor. That skill set proved both asset and liability when he assumed the role of Secretary of the Navy in October 1992, in the wake of Tailhook’s upheaval. Tasked with restoring public confidence, O’Keefe’s tenure also set the tone for the Navy’s posture during the 1993 BRAC round—a posture shaped more by balance sheets than by drydocks.

His leadership favored consolidation and financial streamlining, often at odds with assessments from technical commands like NAVSEA. These groups, grounded in operational realities, found themselves marginalized as O’Keefe and his budget-minded appointees pushed forward the idea of “megaports” and infrastructure shedding. The Navy’s industrial base, once a pillar of readiness, became a line item ripe for reduction.

O’Keefe’s short tenure left a lasting mark: He handed down to the Navy and its industrial base a force unprepared to carry out its mission in the strategic drift that followed the Cold War. A force even more ill-equipped to meet the rapidly changing demands of the Great Power Competition Era that has reemerged.

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

than steel decks. Nemfakos, too, was known more for confronting budget baselines than warfighting needs. Neither man possessed deep experience with shipyards, installations, or the delicate interplay of fleet readiness and industrial sustainment. Their vision for the Navy's future centered on consolidated "megaports" and leaner infrastructure, a model driven by economic optics and fiscal doctrine, not geographic balance or strategic redundancy.

NAVSEA, the command rooted in technical infrastructure and operational sustainment, sounded the alarm. Its analysts emphasized drydock capacity, workforce expertise, and long-range mission requirements. They warned that the proposed closures would hollow out the Navy's repair backbone and risk long-term readiness. But those voices were drowned out by politically packaged narratives, Congressional choreography, and a well-crafted story of reinvention. Closure, the narrative went, was not just necessary, it was visionary.

In truth, the BRAC process bore little resemblance to an impartial review. Nemfakos led a team ostensibly tasked with evaluating infrastructure needs, but in retrospect it is now obvious that the real job was retrofitting analysis to support decisions that had already been made. Dissent was not only unwelcome, it was actively suppressed. As the Government Accountability Office reported in April 1993, *"Some service officials expressed concern that the process was driven more by budgetary goals than by operational requirements. In several cases, alternative recommendations from infrastructure commands were not fully considered or were excluded from final deliberations."*

For Mare Island, and for many legacy installations on the chopping block, the reckoning felt more like a verdict than an inquiry. The Navy wasn't just downsizing, it was shedding its institutional memory, trading seasoned capabilities for fiscal optics and political convenience. The exclusion of operators' assessments, those with direct, hard-won knowledge of fleet sustainment and industrial requirements, didn't just skew the process; it crippled the Navy's functional capacity for decades and continues to this day. As public shipyard infrastructure was halved, and private capacity simultaneously continued to erode under commercial pressures, the United States found itself with no viable mechanism to surge repair and construction in response to global instability. Shipbuilding slowed to a trickle, maintenance backlogs ballooned, and competition vanished, ushering in higher costs and limited industrial agility. This, despite extraordinary gains in shipbuilding efficiency, including automatic welding, Computer Aided Design (CAD) Computer Aided Machining (CAM), and modular construction within environmentally controlled enclosures.

Yet the results were a damning indictment of the intentional crippling of public and private shipyard infrastructure. Mare Island, at the height of Cold War urgency, commissioned ballistic missile submarines in just 2 years and 4½ months from keel laying to commissioning, a staggering pace compared to the projected timelines for the first of the current new ballistic missile submarine Columbia Class boats, which are expected to require more than four times that duration. The Mare Island schedule performance was not extraordinary, it was typical. This was due in part to the fact that the first 41 ballistic missile submarines were built in an intense arena of competition with two private and two public shipyards competing on cost, schedule and product quality (at the same time one additional private yard and public yard were building nuclear powered Fast Attack submarines for an impressive six different shipyards actively involved in constructing the nuclear submarine fleet). Today's Columbia Class submarine is being built through a strategic partnership between two private shipyards. This is effectively a single shipyard that has been sole sourced the contract and is not subject to competitive pressures. The result is reflected in the dramatic increases in cost and schedule for these important platforms. The

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

ramifications of the cuts in shipyard capacity still echo. The shipyard capacity that was retained by the 1993 BRAC Process was insufficient to even support the stated 1999 planning level it was purportedly targeting. The result was predictable, cost growth, overhaul delays, strategic bottlenecks, and a Navy grappling with the legacy of decisions made not in drydocks, but in budget briefings

A Flawed Assumption - How BRAC Misjudged Naval Shipyards

The 1993 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process was built to address 5 criticisms of the 1991 BRAC process, chief among these criticisms were partisanship, inconsistent data and methodology and limited transparency. Just as in 1991 it stood on three analytical pillars: capacity, military value and cost; however, the process was modified to provide for more oversight and independence by the BRAC Commission, greater standardization of the Military Value Criteria and Improved Data Validation. These were ostensibly intended to provide an objective framework for evaluating how many naval shipyards should be retained, realigned, or closed. However, capacity analysis was so simplistic and deeply flawed to almost be comical. In addition, the implementation of this framework, particularly for Mare Island Naval Shipyard, was deeply compromised.

As stated by Congressman George Miller In his May 13, 1993, letter to the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission which offered a pointed critique of the 1993 BRAC process regarding Mare Island, he wrote:

“It appears that the decision to close Mare Island was made before the analysis was conducted, and the analysis was then tailored to support that decision.”

Looking closely at the analysis behind the closure decision and considering the state of the Nation’s shipbuilding infrastructure it left behind, it’s easy to see why the congressman reached that conclusion.

7) Capacity: A Misleading Metric

The Navy’s 1993 BRAC analysis rested on an unrealistically simplistic measure: “maximum theoretical capacity,” defined as the work a shipyard could perform without staffing, budget, or other constraints. This figure was derived by simply asking each public shipyard, “*How much work could you do?*”, a question divorced from the real-world complexities of shipbuilding and instead focusing on how many workers could be employed on the shipyard. Critical factors such as the size and number of dry docks, outfitting piers, enclosed shops, building ways, and the availability of a trained workforce were ignored in the capacity analysis and relegated instead to the separate ‘military value’ assessment, distorting the true picture of industrial capability.

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

a) Inputs That Distorted Reality

Shipyards submitted certified capacity data with minimal guidance, resulting in widely inconsistent interpretations. Mare Island, for instance, reported its potential workload based on a three-shift operating model, while other shipyards assumed just a single shift, making Mare Island appear to have far more excess capacity in comparison. The Navy further distorted the comparison by assigning off-site work (such as Alameda and Pearl Harbor projects) to Mare Island's totals without applying similar adjustments to other public shipyards. This inflated Mare Island's numbers while diminishing the apparent capacity of its peers. Most critically, the analysis excluded private nuclear-capable shipyards altogether, skewing the assessment and ignoring key logistical and strategic realities, particularly the East-West distribution of naval infrastructure. When these deficiencies were pointed out to the BRAC Commission, the analysis was never adjusted.

b) What BRAC Measured, and Ignored

While certain attributes, such as nuclear refueling, drydock certification, and select infrastructure factors, were captured under the Military Value assessment, several critical strategic components were overlooked entirely. Most striking was the complete omission of Mare Island's highly classified Ocean Engineering program, despite its enduring national security importance. That same program had previously been cited by the DoD as justification for *excluding* Mare Island from closure consideration during the 1991 BRAC round. Yet by 1993, despite the Cold War's official end, Ocean Engineering remained so vital that, in the wake of the closure decision for Mare Island, it was relocated in its entirety to Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, at substantial cost, and remains active today. Its absence from the Military Value matrix was not a bureaucratic oversight; it was a glaring and intentional analytical failure.

Equally absent was any systematic evaluation of Geographic Distribution, a factor inseparable from surge readiness and strategic resilience. With the closure of Mare Island, followed two years later by Long Beach, the Navy consolidated its West Coast infrastructure into two megaports: San Diego and Puget Sound, only one of which retains naval shipyard capability. While this may have eliminated some distributed capacity, it also abandoned geographic redundancy, placing all public shipyard capability in a single location perched atop the Cascadia Subduction Zone, one of the most seismically active and geologically unstable regions in the world. Scientists warn that this fault system is capable of unleashing magnitude 9.0+ earthquakes and triggering devastating tsunamis. In concentrating essential repair and maintenance capabilities in Puget Sound, the Navy has left itself catastrophically exposed to a regional event that could paralyze fleet sustainment with no alternative fallback.

Finally, Surge Capacity and Contingency Readiness were never modeled in the BRAC process, and thus never factored into closure deliberations. The framework was blind to wartime flexibility, emergency mobilization, and strategic elasticity. Instead, it treated shipyards as interchangeable units on a balance sheet, ignoring their unique functions, geographic interdependence, and specialized expertise. This led to decisions that not only misunderstood operational realities, but actively undermined the Navy's long-term industrial posture.

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

c) **Fallout from a Flawed Framework**

By relying on an oversimplified and inconsistent capacity metric, the Navy accelerated the premature reduction of shipyard infrastructure, especially on the West Coast. Within years, it confronted tangible shortages in skilled labor, drydock facilities, and operational readiness. This wasn't merely poor analysis, it was a failure of stewardship.

8) Military Value: A Matrix of Errors

The Military Value matrix was designed to evaluate each shipyard's strategic significance based on infrastructure, technical capability, and alignment with mission priorities. The BRAC process, in theory, aimed to reduce excess capacity while maximizing the utility of retained assets. Yet the scoring process was anything but transparent. Behind closed doors, two internal teams, one from the Navy and one from the DoD, informally known as the Nemfakus team, developed evaluations without public scrutiny.

In Mare Island's case, 28 factual and procedural errors, each of which undermined the yard's profile, were submitted by proponents of the shipyard to the Presidentially appointed BRAC committee. These included the failure to credit Mare Island's Ocean Engineering program, whose support of submarine platforms and clandestine missions, including nine Presidential Unit Citations awarded to USS *Parche* and related operations, represented unparalleled contributions to national security.

Other misjudgments were equally damaging. Mare Island's dual drydock refueling capability for SSN-688 submarines received no recognition, while Long Beach Naval Shipyard was inexplicably credited with nuclear capabilities it did not possess. In some cases, drydock scores directly contradicted data published in the Navy's own technical manuals, with no adjustments or justification offered.

When BRAC Commission staff flagged these issues, Navy officials responded with obfuscation, offering no satisfactory explanations. Despite clear evidence of error and omission, the staff ultimately accepted the flawed analysis and endorsed the DoD's recommendations.

Together, these failures called into question not only Mare Island's treatment, but the credibility of the entire evaluation process on which the future of the Navy's industrial base was predicated.

9) Manipulated Outcomes

One of BRAC's core decision-making tools in the 1990s was the Cost of Base Realignment Actions (COBRA) model. It was billed as an impartial mechanism for weighing the fiscal trade-offs of relocating military missions, balancing construction costs, personnel shifts, environmental cleanup, and long-term operations against projected savings. In theory, COBRA offered objective guidance; in practice, it often masked strategic nuance behind spreadsheets.

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

Nowhere was this more evident than in the case of Mare Island Naval Shipyard (MINS) and its Ocean Engineering program. Internal Navy estimates placed the true cost of relocating Ocean Engineering to Puget Sound at \$280 million, yet COBRA officially reported only \$82 million, a discrepancy of nearly \$200 million. This wasn't a footnote; it cut the legs out from the Navy's entire cost rationale for closure.

At the April 1993 BRAC hearings, the issue drew direct criticism:

“The COBRA model treats Ocean Engineering like it's a warehouse operation. It's not. It's a highly specialized, mission-critical capability that cannot be replicated without enormous cost and disruption.”

— BRAC Hearing Witness

“We submitted detailed cost breakdowns to the Navy, but they were ignored. The official numbers are not just wrong, they're misleading.”

— Mare Island Analyst

The failures weren't theoretical; they were built into COBRA's foundations and included:

- Oversimplified modeling ignored Ocean Engineering's drydock and submergence systems unique requirements.
- Mission continuity costs, like disruption and retraining, were excluded.
- Shipyard-level estimates from Mare Island were selectively left out.
- Replication costs in high-expense regions like Puget Sound were undervalued.
- The exclusion of 142 million in environmental remediation costs.
- The exclusion of \$340 million in nuclear decontamination costs.

Meanwhile, throughout 1992 and into 1993 the internal “Nemfakos team” conducted scoring and weighting behind closed doors, without public oversight or independent review. When released for public review the BRAC Commission staff flagged concerns about transparency and procedural bias, particularly after discovering 28 errors in Mare Island's Military Value assessment. When corrected, Mare Island proponents found that the shipyard ranked third among Navy shipyards, not seventh as the Navy originally claimed.

These omissions weren't technical oversights; they were strategic exclusions that distorted the economic rationale and misled the BRAC Commission. As one local official testified:

“We're not asking for favoritism. We're asking for fairness. If COBRA can't tell the truth about Mare Island, then it's not fit to guide a billion-dollar decisions.”

What began as an efficiency review evolved into a justification exercise, one that reversed the analytic order: decisions first, math later.

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

10) What Was Truly at Stake

Mare Island's closure wasn't just a loss of industrial capacity; it was a severing of historical continuity. Its Cold War contributions, strategic Pacific location, and specialized nuclear expertise were undervalued, obscured by classification, and ultimately dismissed. And in the broader calculus, one sacred element was overlooked entirely: the fate of its cemetery, a resting place for generations of naval service members whose legacy risked being forgotten in the rush to downsize.

The Forgotten Ground

As the BRAC process moved forward, little thought was given to the MINC. The oldest naval cemetery on the West Coast, resting place for more than 900 military personnel, family members, and foreign naval guests, was omitted from transition planning. It was not listed in closure assessments, not earmarked for preservation, and not assigned a clear future.

The Navy, seeking to transfer the site, reached out to the VA. But the VA declined, citing longstanding policy: it would not assume responsibility for "closed" cemeteries, burial grounds no longer accepting new interments. Officials argued they lacked statutory authority, funding, or operational precedent to accept non-active sites from other federal agencies.

This position left the cemetery in legal limbo.

With no federal agency willing to take title, the Navy turned to the City of Vallejo. As part of a broader negotiations transfer of Mare Island for an Economic Development Conveyance (EDC), Vallejo was required to assume ownership of the cemetery in exchange for receiving the bulk of the former base. It was a quiet transaction, buried in property documents, devoid of ceremony, and largely unnoticed.

The cemetery became a civic obligation, not a commemorative mission. No dedicated funding accompanied its transfer. No preservation plan was put in place. And so began its long decline.

A Broader Strategic Failure

Even beyond Mare Island, BRAC's long-term impact on naval shipyard capacity proved far more damaging than anticipated.

By eliminating half of the Navy's public shipyards, BRAC created a bottleneck in maintenance and overhaul capacity. The decline of the private shipbuilding sector, already weakened by the withdrawal of federal subsidies and the end of Cold War contracts, left no viable commercial alternative.

Appendix B: The Flawed BRAC Process

In the early 2000s, cracks in readiness were apparent. Ships were delayed. Overhauls backed up. Drydock space became scarce. The most glaring failure came in 2015, when the nuclear-powered submarine USS *Boise* lost its dive certification, and remained out of service since 2017, awaiting repair. Current estimates are that the \$1.2 billion overhaul will not complete until 2029. The cause? Insufficient shipyard capacity.

In 2005, despite a growing trend of Lost Operational Days for Navy ships due to the lack of adequate shipyard capacity the DoD proposed closing yet another public shipyard, Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. This time, however, a more skeptical BRAC Commission rejected the recommendation, acknowledging the mounting strain on naval infrastructure, a quiet recognition that the earlier closures, including Mare Island, had been shortsighted.

An Orphaned Legacy

Amid all of this, MINC remained an afterthought, legally transferred, but structurally abandoned. For more than a decade after the Navy's departure, it received only minimal attention from the City of Vallejo, whose limited resources were stretched across the broader base redevelopment.

Annual Veterans Day and Memorial Day ceremonies continued, organized by volunteers and veterans' groups. But the grounds deteriorated. Headstones cracked. Trees overgrew graves. Drainage systems failed. In this sacred place, where Medal of Honor recipients, Civil War veterans, Russian and French sailors, and the daughter of Francis Scott Key were buried, no flag flew, no agency was responsible, and no federal promise was kept.

BRAC had claimed more than a shipyard. It had allowed the abandonment of hallowed ground.

Conclusion: More Than Numbers

The BRAC process is often remembered for its cost savings and efficiency gains. But those metrics obscure deeper truths. What was lost at Mare Island wasn't just industrial capacity, it was stewardship. It was institutional memory. It was the physical embodiment of a nation's military past, left to decay. In essence, multiple sources, ranging from government reports to journalistic investigations, affirm that canceling shipbuilding subsidies in the early 1980s and allowing both commercial and public shipyard capacity to erode laid the groundwork for today's industrial bottlenecks. As Walt Kelly's famous Pogo comic strip stated, "*We Have Met the Enemy-and He Is Us.*"

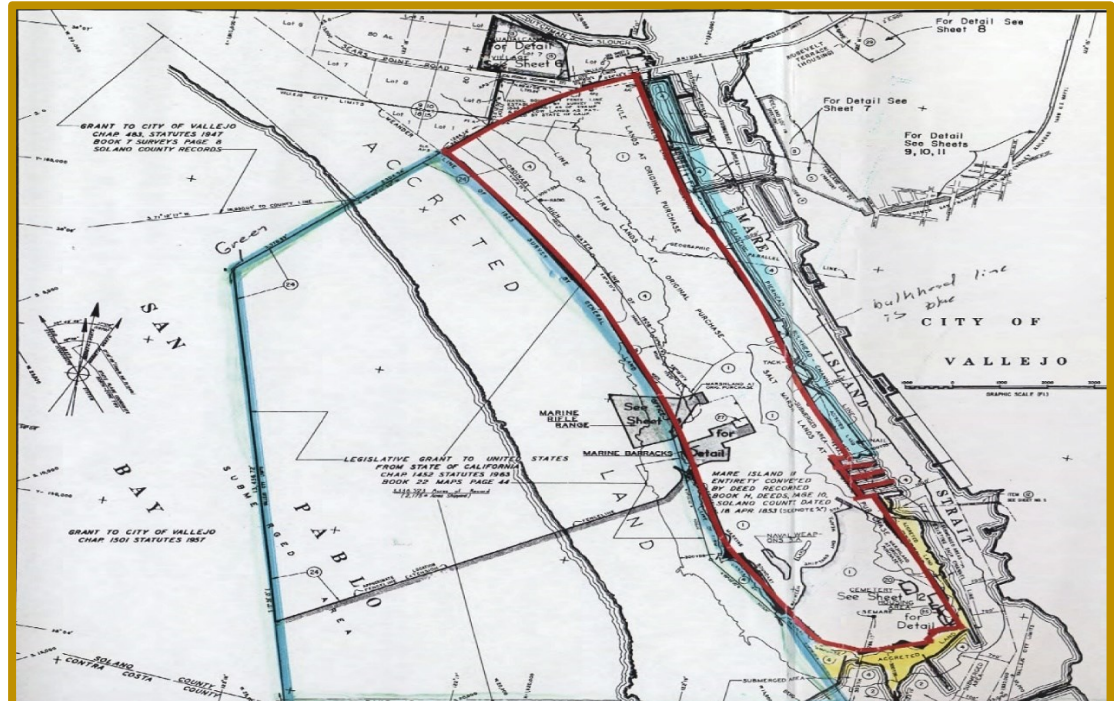
The MINC became a case study in unintended consequences, a quiet casualty of bureaucratic indifference. It took nearly a quarter-century, and a growing chorus of veterans and citizens, to restore visibility to this injustice and to rekindle the national obligation that had gone unfulfilled.

Appendix C: Trust Encumbrances and the Path to Federal Transfer

I. The Dispossessed Landowners of Mare Island: A Forgotten Struggle for Land

To understand the final issue affecting the reuse of Mare Island and the MINC we must go back to the turbulent years following California's admission to the Union, the question of who truly owned Mare Island ignited a legal conflict that would climb all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The 1850 Swamp and Overflowed Lands Act and the Tidelands Trust, would combine to impact not only the reuse of Mare Island, but to also encumber and delay the MINC transfer to the VA. The Tidelands Trust is derived from Roman and English common law, and was originally intended to safeguard public access to navigable waters for commerce, fishing, and navigation. Over the centuries, its scope broadened to encompass recreation, wildlife habitat, and open space, yet its foundational principles remained largely unchanged, reflecting traditional views of public land use focused narrowly on waterways. In practice, those principles became increasingly restrictive and bureaucratic, limiting how communities could adapt trust lands to modern needs such as conservation, public access, and cultural use.

Following the 1850 Swamp and Overflowed Lands Act, California began granting patents to lands it identified as swampy or flooded (These grants of lands were completely at odds with how the SLC interprets the restrictions imposed by the Trust today). Two such areas on or near Mare Island, Survey No. 34 and Survey No. 569, were patented to individuals under what turned out to be flawed state authority. David V. Darlington received Patent 34 in 1857, and John W. Pearson received Patent 569 in 1874. These lands were later acquired by Edward O'Donnell and Stewart, respectively, who fully believed their titles were secure under California law. Yet, by that time, the United States Navy had already established Mare Island as a federal military installation. In 1853, the Navy purchased the island from Bissell and Aspinwall, two private parties who had acquired it from Victor Castro, the original 1841 grantee under Mexican law. The Navy's



Navy Map showing land status on Mare Island resulting from the Supreme Court Decision in *United States v. O'Donnell*

Lands shown within the Red Boundary Line (the "Joy Survey Line") were owned by the Navy in fee simple absolute – the highest and most complete form of property ownership. Despite the Governor's Task Force recommendation that identified the need to focus on minimizing unnecessary impacts of the Tidelands SLC saw things differently

Appendix C: Trust Encumbrances and the Path to Federal Transfer

legal footing was rooted in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which the U.S. had used to confirm Mexican land grants following the Mexican-American War. Despite the Navy's claim, the state of California issued a patent to a private party, Darlington in 1857 purporting to convey some of Mare Island as part of the swamp or overflowed lands granted to the state by Swamp Lands Act of Congress in 1850. This patent was not recorded until 1879 when a successor in interest, Sawyer, acquired the claim. When the Navy disputed the state patents the issue went to court.

When O'Donnell attempted to assert his state-issued title to Survey 34, he was denied entry by the base commander. The case escalated to the courts as *United States v. O'Donnell*, a quiet title action initiated by the government to conclusively resolve the dispute. To formally define federal title, the Department of the Interior in 1923 commissioned Cadastral Engineer Francis E. Joy to perform a precise public land survey. Joy's work, approved by the U.S. Surveyor General for California, established Tract 38, a 1,473.95-acre parcel encompassing all Navy-held lands on Mare Island. Most crucially, Joy's survey defined the mean high-water line, the boundary between federal uplands and state-controlled tidelands. This Joy Line was not only used in land administration; it became the authoritative boundary line in federal court.

The U.S. Supreme Court, in a 1938 decision, ruled in favor of the Navy, finding that all land within Tract 38, as surveyed by Joy in 1923, belonged exclusively to the federal government. The Court explicitly recognized the Joy Survey's mean high-water line as the legitimate boundary of federal title, thereby rejecting the claims based on the 1850 Swamp and Overflowed Lands Act and the state patents it produced.

This ruling had sweeping implications:

- It nullified the State of California's claim to any reversionary interest in the land.
- It confirmed that the State held no jurisdiction over the area under the Tidelands Trust, as all lands within the Joy Line were above mean high water.
- It made clear that federal ownership was not dependent on continued military use, ownership was held in fee simple absolute.

The Supreme Court later addressed the neighboring Survey 569 in *United States v. Stewart* (1942), but nothing in that decision altered the O'Donnell ruling. In fact, the Court reiterated that land within the Joy-defined boundary, Tract 38, was entirely federal and not subject to claims under state law. However, the SLC took a different view of the impact of *United States v. Stewart* which ultimately led to the need for a Settlement Agreement between the City of Vallejo and the SLC. A Settlement Agreement which would ultimately lead to significant delays in the transfer of the MINC to the VA's NCA.

The Navy's interpretation of the outcome of *United States v. O'Donnell* was final: private individuals who had lawfully purchased land from the State of California found their titles void. The base commander's denial of access was not only backed by the Navy, but it was also backed by the Supreme Court. These landowners, despite holding paper titles, were dispossessed by a deeper and older chain of federal title upheld by treaty, survey, and judicial decree. As a result, one could conclude that those holding the state issued patents had been defrauded.

Appendix C: Trust Encumbrances and the Path to Federal Transfer

Their forgotten story remains an important chapter in the legal and historical identity of Mare Island, and a powerful reminder of how the precise placement of a surveyor's line, in this case, the Joy Line, provided an opportunity for the SLC to, consistent with the findings and recommendations of a governor's task force to advance the economic development of Mare Island and the MINC, but as we shall see the SLC had different ideas.

II. Failed State Policy and Implementation: The Tidelands Trust Case

The BRAC process of 1993 delivered a serious blow to California, which faced a disproportionate number of military base closures compared to nationwide. Recognizing the threat to local economies, Governor Pete Wilson established the California Military Base Reuse Task Force under the Office of Planning and Research. This bipartisan advisory body was tasked with developing policy recommendations to accelerate the transition and reuse of shuttered military facilities across the state.

The Task Force's final report to the Governor identified long-standing legal and bureaucratic obstacles that had historically delayed development, chief among them the Public Tidelands Trust Doctrine. Its inclusion as a key barrier was no surprise. Cities across California had struggled for years with the Doctrine's complex and often ambiguous provisions, which were frequently used by anti-development interests to obstruct coastal projects.

Originally rooted in Roman and English common law, the Tidelands Trust Doctrine grants the state authority over lands below the mean high-water mark for public uses such as navigation, fishing, and commerce. Over time, its interpretation expanded to include recreation, habitat protection, and open space. However, the lack of clarity regarding whether decommissioned federal land, particularly filled or reclaimed areas, was subject to the Trust created a chilling effect on investment, complicated title transfers, and stalled critical redevelopment.

To address these issues, the Task Force recommended a set of targeted reforms:

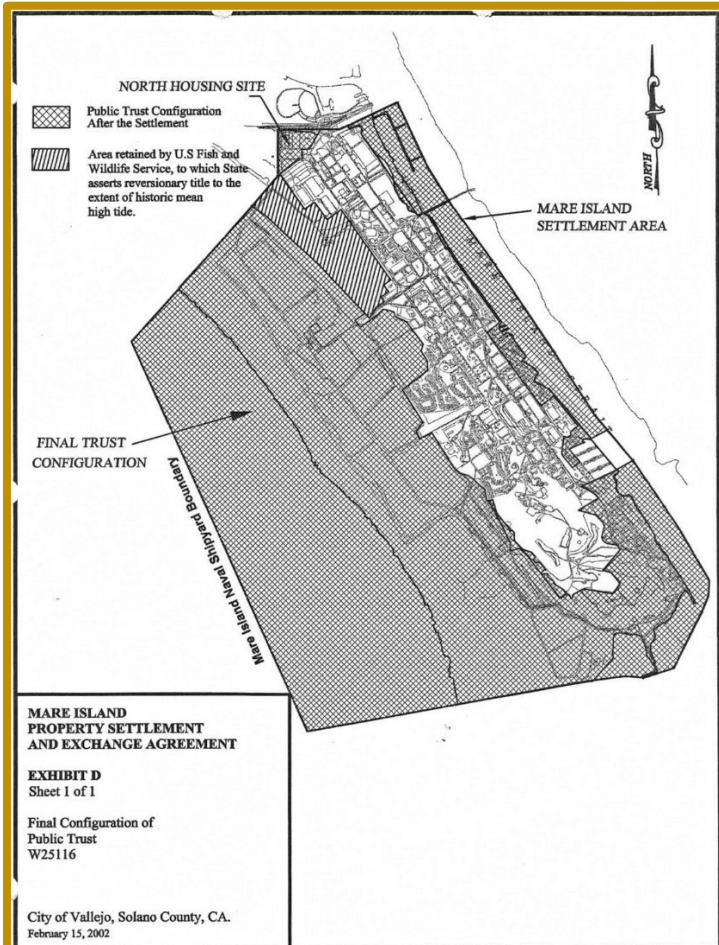
- Clarify title issues between state and federal agencies, especially regarding former military lands.
- Encourage direct coordination between the State Lands Commission (SLC) and federal agencies to resolve jurisdictional uncertainty.
- Consider legislative or regulatory clarifications to facilitate redevelopment while safeguarding public interests.

These proposals sought to streamline land transfers and eliminate the legal ambiguity that hindered base reuse. Yet despite the Task Force's guidance, no legislative or executive action was taken to implement its recommendations. In the absence of reform, the SLC continued to apply the Public Trust Doctrine aggressively, even in cases where the law and legal precedent, particularly the Supreme Court's decision in *United States v. O'Donnell* (1938), clearly limited its applicability.

Nowhere was this more evident than on Mare Island, where the federal government held lands in fee simple absolute under the 1923 Joy Survey, land the Supreme Court confirmed was not subject to state tidal claims. Despite this precedent, SLC staff asserted that the Joy Survey was not dispositive and that the Court's ruling did not apply to large portions of Mare Island. SLC staff pointed another Supreme Court decision *United States V. Stewart* to argue that the Navy was wrongly interpreting their ownership. This position was disputed by the Navy (in fact, the Navy argued that

Appendix C: Trust Encumbrances and the Path to Federal Transfer

Stewart reinforced the *O'Donnell* decision as opposed to overturning it) effectively reopened settled law and introduced new, unnecessary barriers to redevelopment.



Final Trust Configuration Map from the Settlement and Exchange Agreement

*In this map the extent of the Trust on Mare Island far exceeds that found by the Supreme Court in *United States v. O'Donnell**

The Navy's analysis of California's position on the tidelands trust emphasized that the State Lands Commission was asserting broad reversionary and public trust claims over portions of Mare Island, while the Navy relied on federal court decisions and the 1923 Joy Survey to argue that much of the property was held in fee simple and free of such encumbrances. To address the impasse, Navy leadership considered four options:

- facilitate a negotiated agreement between the State and the City of Vallejo,
- warrant title against state claims, pursue a quiet title action in federal court, or
- proceed with a quitclaim transfer and leave title risk unresolved.

Ultimately, the Navy chose to focus on supporting an agreement between the SLC and Vallejo, a strategy shaped by the fact that it was increasingly likely the base was being conveyed to the City at no cost, making it reasonable to require the City to work with the State to resolve lingering title issues. As a result the SLC and the City of Vallejo negotiated a Settlement and Exchange Agreement, which removed Trust restrictions from certain high-priority redevelopment parcels and reimposed them on other areas deemed less essential, including, regrettably, the MINC. This workaround allowed redevelopment to proceed, but only after years of delay stemming from the failure to enact the Task Force's recommendations.

The unintended consequence of this settlement became painfully clear years later. When Congress authorized the transfer of MINC to the VA in 2021, what should have been a straightforward process was derailed by the Trust encumbrance. Despite MINC's location on upland terrain far from tidal waters, and its inclusion within the original 1853 federal deed, the cemetery had been swept into the Trust zone as part of the broader settlement agreement.

The application of the Trust to MINC, land never intended for navigation, commerce, or recreation, created a legal quagmire that significantly delayed the transfer to the VA. Clearing the encumbrance required unwinding portions of the original Settlement Agreement, conducting extensive title research, and coordinating legal actions among the

Appendix C: Trust Encumbrances and the Path to Federal Transfer

City of Vallejo, the State Lands Commission, the Navy, and the VA. What could have been resolved in a single federal deed transfer instead became a prolonged, multi-year bureaucratic, expensive and legal challenge.

III. Tidelands Trust and Its Impact on Mare Island Naval Cemetery

When Congress authorized the conveyance of MINC in 2021, expectations of a swift federal handoff were dashed. The presence of a Trust encumbrance, rooted in a settlement based on dubious legal precedent, meant that the agreement itself had to be partially unwound. Doing so was not simple as it required amendment of the Settlement Agreement between the City of Vallejo and the SLC and that proved overly complicated as the SLC also required an elaborate array of legal documents to completely purge the encumbrance from the chain of title for the MINC, such as a detailed title investigation, amendment of the original settlement, and coordinated legal action between the City, the SLC, the Navy, and the VA. What should have been a simple transfer of federal land became a costly, time-consuming regulatory exercise.

The MINC episode is more than a footnote in land use history. It serves as a case study in how outdated legal frameworks and rigid administrative interpretations, when left unchecked, can complicate even the most basic acts of public service, like preserving a historic cemetery for the nation's veterans.

Unwinding the provisions of the Settlement Agreement and its impact on the MINC was no small task. The following table provides a list of actions that were made necessary to not only undo the Trust impact on the MINC, but also to provide for necessary utilities, parking and access to the MINC.

Appendix C: Trust Encumbrances and the Path to Federal Transfer

Category		Action	Responsible Party
1.	Legal and Administrative Analysis	Detailed title and deed research to confirm federal ownership and absence of tidelands connection.	City Attorney / Title Counsel
2.	Legal and Administrative Analysis	Analysis of how cemetery was included in the 2002 Settlement Agreement.	City Attorney
3.	Legal and Administrative Analysis	Regulatory review justifying exclusion from Public Trust under state law.	City Attorney / State Lands Commission
4.	Formal Actions by City and State	Amendment to the 2002 Settlement Agreement to exclude the cemetery parcel.	City of Vallejo / State Lands Commission
5.	Formal Actions by City and State	Execution of Grant Deed from City to State to clarify title.	City of Vallejo
6.	Formal Actions by City and State	Issuance of Trust Termination Patent from State to City to remove Trust status.	State Lands Commission
7.	Formal Actions by City and State	Execution of Quitclaim Deed from City to VA to finalize federal transfer.	City of Vallejo
8.	Formal Actions by City and State	Approval of Easement Deed for VA to use adjacent land for restrooms and parking.	City of Vallejo
9.	Formal Actions by City and State	Negotiation of License Agreement with U.S. Navy for utility access.	City of Vallejo / U.S. Navy
10.	Formal Actions by City and State	MOU with VA to provide utility service and stormwater drainage maintenance.	City of Vallejo / U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
11.	Environmental and Compliance Measures	CEQA findings declaring project categorically exempt (Sections 15301, 15325, 15331).	City of Vallejo / Planning Staff
12.	Interagency Coordination and Execution	City Manager is authorized to execute all necessary documents and agreements.	City Manager
13.	Interagency Coordination and Execution	Coordination with State Lands Commission to approve Trust Termination Patent.	State Lands Commission
14.	Interagency Coordination and Execution	Preparation of clean title to satisfy VA and federal legal requirements.	City of Vallejo / VA / Title Counsel

Appendix D: Additional Resources

Because of its historic importance much has been written about Mare Island Naval Shipyard and Vallejo and their contributions to the Nation. What follows is a selection of references where you can learn more.

- Allen, Robert L. “The Port Chicago Mutiny, The Story of the Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History.” Heyday Books, 1993.
- Baker, Cindy L. “Mare Island Marines: 130 Years on Guard.” Pamphlet, Undated.
- Barbosa-Cortez, M. Hispanics and Latinos in Vallejo. Mt. Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2022.
- Beebe, Rose Marie and Robert M. Senkewicz. “Recuerdos, Historical and Personal Remembrances Relating to Alto California, 1769-1849. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo.” University of Oklahoma Press, 2023.
- Braisted, William R. “The United States Navy in the Pacific, 1897-1909.” Naval Institute Press, 1958.
- Brunzell, Kara. National Register of Historic Places: “Sperry Flour Company Vallejo Mills Historic District,” July 28, 2017.
- Castleman, Bruce A. “Knickerbocker Commodore, The Life and Times of John Drake Sloat 1781-1867,” State University of New York Press, 2016.
- City of Vallejo. “Mare Island Final Reuse Plan.” July 1994.
- Cooling, Benjamin Franklin. “USS *Olympia*, Herald of Empire.” Naval Institute Press, 2000.
- Craven, John Pina. “The Cold War Battle Beneath the Sea, The Silent War.” Touchstone, 2001.
- Cullen, Gary. The Boys From Boston. Vallejo: Gary Cullen, 2015.
- Davis, Barbara L. “Mare Island St. Peter’s Chapel, Vallejo California, An Historic Chapel, A Fine Arts Gallery, A Naval Museum.” 2014.
- DeArmond, Robert N. “The USS *Saginaw* in Alaska Waters, 1867-1868.” The Limestone Press, 1997.
- Dewey, George. “Autobiography of George Dewey, Admiral of the Navy.” Charles Scribner’s Sons. 1913.
- Duffy, James P. “Lincoln’s Admiral, The Civil War Campaigns of David Farragut.” John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997.
- Duncan, Francis. “Rickover and the Nuclear Navy, The Discipline of Technology.” Naval Institute Press. 1989.
- Evans, Holden. “One Man’s Fight for a Better Navy.” 2015.
- Farragut’s Press: newsletter of the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation, <https://www.mihpf.org/newsleter>
- Farrelly, D., Meenaghan, P. M., DePew, J. St. Vincent Ferrer Parish, Vallejo California: A History of One Hundred Twenty-five Years 1955-1980. Saint Vincent Ferrer School and Parish, 1980.

Appendix D: Additional Resources

- Fish, Shirley. “HMS Centurian 1733-1769 An Historic Biographical-Travelogue of One of Britain’s Most Famous Warships and the Capture of the *Nuestra Senroa*.” authorHouse. 2015.
- Gaudi, Robert. “The War of Jenkins' Ear: The Forgotten Struggle for North and South America: 1739-1742.” Pegasus Books, 2021.
- General Mills: “History of General Mills: 1941-1946,” 2017.
- Horan, James D. “Shenandoah, The Memoirs of Lieutenant Commanding James I. Waddell.” Crown Publishers, Inc., 1960.
- Kern, James E. Vallejo. Mt. Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2004.
- Klobuchar, Richard P. “The USS *Ward*, An Operational History of The Ship That Fired the First American Shot of World War II.” McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. 2006.
- Lasso, B.R. (2018). Latinos in the United States Military: World War II. Eastern Washington University.
- Leach, Frank A. “Recollections of A Newspaperman, A Record of Life and Events in California.” Samual Levinson Publisher, 1917.
- Lemon, Sue. “Closure The Final Twenty Years of Mare Island Naval Shipyard.” Global Interprint, Inc. 2001.
- Lemon, Sue and E.D. Wichels. “St. Peter’s Chapel A Dream, A Memorial, and A Christian Beacon.” Mare Island Historical Record, Inc. 1994.
- Lemon, Sue and E.D. Wichels. “Sidewheelers to Nuclear Power, A Pictorial Essay Covering 123 Years at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard.” Leeward Publications, Inc., 1977.
- Lot, Arnold. A Long Line of Ships. Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1954.
- Lowell, Joe. “Mare Island Memories.” Vallejo Times Herald, 1996.
- Lund, Midge. Curtains Up: Onstage in Vallejo’s Theatres 1850-1950.
- Lund, Marjorie. “Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum -- A History of Vallejo’s Treasure House 1974-1994” Vallejo, CA: Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum, 1995.
- Marshal, General George C., General H. H. Arnold and Admiral Ernest J. King. “The War Reports.” J. B. Lippincott Company, 1947.
- McGriff Payne, Sharon. African-Americans in Vallejo. Mt. Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2009.
- Munro-Fraser, J. P. “History of Solano County...and histories of its cities, towns...etc...” San Francisco Call. 1879.
- National Register of Historic Places, Nomination Form, Mare Island Historic District Signed by Sue Lemmon, Public Affairs Officer. December 1, 1974.

Appendix D: Additional Resources

- National Register of Historic Places, Nomination Form, Mare Island Historic District (Boundary Increase). Signed by the Keeper, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service. January 23, 1997.
- Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program. “Nuclear Closure of Charleston and Mare Island Naval Shipyards.” US Government Printing Office, December 1996.
- Naval Reactors. “The United States Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program.” US Government Printing Office, March 2013.
- O’Drain, Peggy, Joyce Giles and Tony W. Llang. “Mare Island Cemetery.” 2016.
- O’Drain, Peggy, Joyce Giles and Tony W. Llang. “Mare Island Cemetery Volume II.” Outskirts Press 2021.
- Orpilla, Mel. *Filipinos in Vallejo*. Mt. Pleasant, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2005.
- Polmar, Norman and O’Connell, John. “Strike From The Sea – The Development and Deployment of Strategic Cruise Missiles Since 1934.” Naval Institute Press. 2020.
- Read, George H. “The Last Cruise of the *Saginaw*.” The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1912.
- Riley, Brendan. *Lower Georgia Street - California’s Forgotten Barbary Coast*. Stroud, Gloucestershire, U.K.: Fonthill Media-America Through Time. 2017.
- Riley, Brendan, “Vanishing Vallejo, Random History Notes on a Colorful California Town.” Gloucestershire, U.K.: Fonthill Media-America. 2022.
- Rockwell, Theodore. “The Rickover Effect, How One Man Made A Difference.” iUniverse, Inc., 1992.

The Storykeepers of Mare Island: Three Volunteers Who Brought the MINC’s Forgotten Lives Back Into History

For years, three dedicated individuals have worked together to ensure that every person interred in the Mare Island Naval Cemetery is remembered with accuracy, dignity, and depth. Their collaboration has produced a series of richly researched books that preserves these stories for future generations.

Margaret “Peggy” O’Drain, a retired California state employee living in Richmond, spent many years as a tour guide and volunteer with the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation. When she first encountered the aging, neglected cemetery, she saw the perfect opportunity to unite her lifelong love of history with her fascination for old burial grounds. Her mission became clear: to secure a lasting place in history for Mare Island by telling the stories of those who will forever rest there.

Joyce Giles, co-author, lives in Vallejo and is a former employee of the Mare Island Naval Shipyard. A longtime volunteer with the Mare Island Historic Park Foundation, she has served as a tour guide, docent, and manager of the Mare Island Museum. Her deep knowledge of the shipyard and its people has been essential to bringing these biographies to life.

Tony Liang has partnered with Peggy and Joyce for years, transforming their extensive research into polished digital formats ready for publication. His behind-the-scenes work ensures that their scholarship can be shared widely and preserved permanently.

Together, this team has created a lasting tribute to the men and women of the MINC — a gift of memory, stewardship, and historical devotion.

Appendix D: Additional Resources

- Santillán, Richard. *Rosita the Riveter: Midwest Mexican American Women During World War II 1941-1945*. Mexican American Studies & Research Center, The University of Arizona, 1989.
- Shanks, Ralph. *Guardians of the Golden Gate, Lighthouses and Lifeboat Stations of San Francisco Bay*.” Costano Books, 1990.
- Sheinkin, Steve. *“The Port Chicago 50, Disaster, Mutiny, and the Fight for Civil Rights.”* Roaring Book Press, 2014.
- Shellum, Brian G. *“Black Officer in a Buffalo Soldier Regiment, The Military Career of Charles Young.”* University of Nebraska Press. 2010.
- Sloan, Jake. *“Standing Tall Willie Long VS. U.S. Government at Mare Island Naval Shipyard.”* Arcadia Publishing, 2023.
- Sontag, Sherry and Christopher Drew. *“The Untold Story of American Submarine Espionage, Blind Man’s Bluff.”* Public Affairs™. 1998.
- Srey, Cornelia Bagg and Pyara Bagg Sandhu. *“The Wreck of the *Saginaw*, The Account Left by her Captain.”* Singha Books, 2017.
- *This American Life: The Port Chicago 50* by Collison, D. September 27, 1996.
- Van Tilburg, Hans Konrad. *“A Civil War Gunboat in Pacific Waters, Life on Board the USS *Saginaw*.”* University Press of Florida, 2010.
- Veronico, Nicholas A. *“World War II Shipyards by the Bay.”* Arcadia Publishing, 2007.
- Wallace, John S. *“The Mare Island Navy-Yard.”* Scribner’s Monthly An Illustrated Magazine For The People. April 1872.
- Webb, W. L. *“Brief Biography and Popular Account of the Unparalleled Discoveries of T. J. J. See.”* Thos. P. Nichols & Son Co. 1913.
- Winkler, David F. *“America’s First Aircraft Carrier – USS *Langley* and The Dawn of Naval Aviation.”* Naval Institute Press. 2024.

Appendix D: Additional Resources

- Zobel, John H. “Eugene Ely Pioneer of Naval Aviation.” Naval Institute Press. 2023.



“We should remember that at Mare Island, we are dealing with a National. Historic Landmark that is one of the most important historic properties in the State of California.”

Cherilyn-Widell
State Historic Preservation Officer
November 25, 1996



Personnel gather in 1892 to unveil a flagged draped monument to 15 sailors from the protected cruiser *USS Boston*. They were killed in an explosion while loading shells in the Naval Ordnance Depot just below the cemetery. (Image Public Domain).

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.18674936